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John Wyndham

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Sam Moskowitz

A PLACE IN THE SUN

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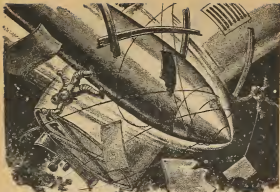
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THE TROONS OF SPACE

By JOHN WYNDHAM

THE SPACE STATION

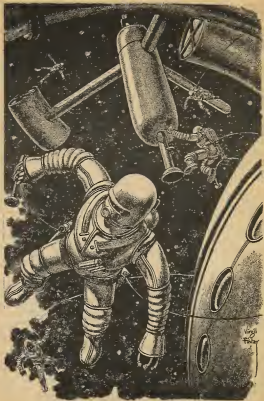
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You're going to like the Troons. There are several generations of them, and in a series of distinguished novelettes, John Wyndham sends the Troon men farther and farther into space. In this first adventure, we meet Trigger Troon as he comes to grips with space. The succeeding adventures will appear in future issues of FANTASTIC.

TICKER TROON emerged from his final interview filled with an emulsion of astonishment, elation, respect, and conviction that he needed refreshment.

The interview had begun formally, as he had expected. Announced by the clerk, he had marched in smartly, and



The projectile crashed in, making a shambles

come to attention before the wide desk. The old boy behind it had turned out to be a considerably older boy than he had been prepared for, but his type was authentic. Lean, he was, with a handsome, slightly weathered, aristocratic face, carefully trimmed hair that was quite white, and rows of ribbons on his left breast.

He had raised his eyes from a clipful of forms to inspect his visitor carefully, and even at that point Ticker had begun to have a suspicion that the interview was not going to be entirely routine, for the old boy—or, to identify him more fully, Air Marshal Sir Godfrey Wilde—did not employ simply that keen-eyed air of summing one's man up at leisure and appearing incompletely satisfied, which had been the drill at lower grades of interview. He was really looking at Ticker as a person, and somewhat oddly, too. Still looking, he nodded slowly to himself, two or three times.

"Troon," he said, reflectively. "Flight-Lieutenant George Montgomery Troon. Very probably known in some circles, I suspect, as Ticker Troon?"

Ticker had been startled.

"Er—yes, sir."

The old boy smiled a little. "The young are seldom very original. G. M. Troon—G.M. T.—hence, deviously, Ticker."

He had gone on regarding Ticker steadily, with a length of inspection that passed the bounds of custom, and of comfort. Ticker grew embarrassed, and had to resist the temptation to shift uneasily. The old boy became aware of the awkwardness. His face relaxed into a smile that was friendly, and reassuring.

"Forgive me, my boy. I was fifty years away," he said.

He glanced down at the forms. Ticker recognized some of them. His whole life history was there. Troon, G.M., aged twenty-four, single, C of E. Parentage . . . education . . . service details . . . medical report . . . C.O.'s report . . . security report, no doubt . . . probably a private-life report . . . notes on his friends, and so on, and so on . . . Quite a bundle of stuff, altogether. The old boy evidently thought so, too, for he pushed it all aside with a touch of impatience, waved his hand at an easy chair, and slid over a silver cigarette-box.

"Sit down there, my boy," he invited.

"Thank you, sir," Ticker

had said. And he had taken the offered cigarette, doing his best to give an impression of ease.

"Tell me," said the old boy, in a friendly tone, "what made you apply for transfer from Air to Space?"

It was an expected, standard question, to which there was a standard answer, but it was not put in the standard way, and, with the man's eye thoughtfully upon him, Ticker decided against giving the standard reply. He frowned, a little uncertainly.

"It isn't easy to explain, sir. In fact, I'm not honestly sure that I know. It—well, it isn't exactly that I *had* to do it. But there is a kind of inevitable feeling about it—as if it were a thing I was bound to do, sooner or later. My natural next step . . ."

"*Next step*," repeated the air marshal. "Not your crowning ambition, then? Next step towards what?"

"I don't really know, sir. Outwards, I think. There's a sort of sense I can't explain . . . a kind of urge onwards and outwards. It is not a sudden idea, sir. It seems always to have been there, at the back of my mind. I'm afraid it all sounds a bit vague . . ." He let himself trail off, inadequately.

But the old boy did not seem to find it inadequate. He gave a couple of his slow nods, and leant back in his chair. For a few moments he gazed up at the cornice of the ceiling, seeming to search his memory. Presently, he said:

"*' . . . for all the night
I heard their thin gnat-
voices cry
Star to faint star across the
sky.' "*

He brought his gaze down to Ticker's surprised face.

"That mean anything to you?" he asked.

Hesitantly, Ticker said:

"I think so, sir. Where does it come from?"

"I was told it was Rupert Brooke—though I've never found the context. But the man I first heard it from was your grandfather."

"My — my grandfather, sir?" Ticker stared at the older man.

"Yes. The other George Montgomery Troon — and does it surprise you to know that he was Ticker Troon, too? Grandfather!" He shook his head, ruefully. "It always seems to be a word for old fellows like me. But Ticker—well, he never had the chance. He was dead, you know, before he was your age."

"Yes, sir. Did you know him well?"

"I did indeed. We were in the same squadron when it happened. You look amazingly like him. I was expecting you, of course; nevertheless, it gave me quite a shock when you came in." The air marshal had paused at that, somewhat lengthily. Then he went on: "He had that feeling, too. He flew because that was as far outwards as we could get in those days—as far as most of us ever expected to get. But not Ticker. I can remember even now the way he used to look up at the night sky, at the moon and the stars, and talk about them as if it were a foregone conclusion that we'd be going out there someday—and sadly, too, because he knew that he'd never be going out there himself. We used to think it comic-strip stuff in those days, but he'd smile off the ragging and the arguments as if he just *knew*." There had been another long pause then before he added: "God, I'm sorry old Ticker can't know about this. If there's one thing that'd make him as pleased as Punch, it'd be to know that his grandson wants to go 'out there'."

"Thank you, sir. It's good to know that," Ticker had

told him. And then, feeling that the ball had been passed to him, he added: "He was killed over Germany, wasn't he, sir?"

"Berlin, August, 1944," said the air marshal. "A big op. His aircraft blew up." He sighed, reminiscently. "When we got back, I went to see his wife, your grandmother. She was a lovely girl, a sweet girl. She took it hard. She went away somewhere, and I lost touch with her. She is still alive?"

"Very much so, sir. She married again in, I think, 1949."

"I'm glad of that. Poor girl. They were only married a week before he was killed, you know."

"Only a week, sir. I didn't know it was as short as that. Really no time at all."

"It was. So your father, and consequently yourself, may be said to exist at all, only by a very narrow margin. They had married a little earlier than they intended. Perhaps Ticker had a premonition: most of us did, though some of us were wrong."

There was another pause which lasted until the air marshal roused himself from his thoughts to say:

"You have stated here that you are single."

"Yes, sir," agreed Ticker.

He became abruptly conscious of the special license in his pocket, and all but looked down to see if it were protruding.

"That was a condition of application, of course," said the old man. "Are you, in fact, unmarried?"

"Yes, sir," Ticker said again, with an uneasy feeling that the pocket might have become transparent.

"And you have no brother?"

"No, sir."

The air marshal remarked, consideringly:

"The stated purpose of this qualification is at variance with my experience. I have never found in war that the married officer is less redoubtable than the single man; rather the other way, in fact. One is led to suspect, therefore, that the matter of pensions and subsequent responsibilities is allowed inappropriate weight. Would you say that it is a good principle that our fittest young men should not infrequently be dissuaded from procreation while the less fit retain the liberty to breed like rabbits?"

"Er—no, sir," Ticker said, wonderingly.

"Good," said the air marshal. "I am very glad to hear it."

He maintained such a steady regard that Ticker was all but impelled to confess the presence of the license; Prudence, however, still kept a fingertip hold on him. When the old boy had spoken again, it was to turn the interview onto more conventional lines for a change.

"You understand the need for top security in this work?" he inquired.

Ticker felt easier.

"Security has been very much stressed all along, sir."

"But you don't know why?"

"I've been given no details, sir."

"Nevertheless, as an intelligent young man you must have formed some ideas."

"Well, sir, from what I have heard and read about experimental space missiles, I should think the time can't be far off now when we shall start to build some kind of space-station—possibly a manned satellite. Would it be something of that sort?"

"It would indeed, my boy—though your deductions are not quite up to date, I'm glad to say. The space-station already exists—in parts. And some of the parts are already

up there. Your job will be to help in the assembly."

Ticker's eyes widened, lit up with enthusiasm.

"I say, sir, that's wonderful. I'd no idea . . . I thought we were rather behind in this sort of thing. Assembling the first space-station . . . !" He trailed off, incoherently.

"I did not say it was the first," the old man reminded him. "In fact, there may be others."

Ticker looked shocked. The air marshal amplified:

"It doesn't do to take things for granted. After all, we know that the Americans, and the Other Fellows, too, have been working hard on it—and our resources are nothing like theirs."

Ticker stared.

"I thought we'd be working with the Americans, sir."

"So we ought to be. We're certainly not working against them, but it just so happens that our people remember *their* love of public announcements at politically happy moments; and *they* remember certain leaks in our security system. Result: we go our different ways—with a great waste of time and energy in duplication of work. On the other hand, it will allow us to stand on our own feet in space

—if that expression may be permitted—instead of being taken along as poor relations. That might one day turn out to have its advantages in definite terms."

"I suppose so, sir. And the Other Fellows . . . ?"

"Oh, they're at work on it, all right. They were known to be working on an unmanned satellite forty years ago when the Americans stole their thunder by making the first public announcement on satellites. One would guess they were thought to be ahead then; hence the announcement. But just how far they've got now is a matter on which this department would like a lot more information than it has.

"Now, as to yourself: first of all there'll be conditioning and training . . ."

Ticker's thoughts were far too chaotic for him to give proper attention to the details that followed. He was looking beyond the walls of the sunlit office and already seeing the fire-pointed blackness of space. In imagination he could feel himself floating in the void. In a—abruptly he became aware that the air marshal had ceased to talk, and was looking at him as if after a question. He tried to pull himself together.

"I'm awfully sorry, sir. I didn't quite follow . . ."

"I can see I'm wasting my time now," the old man had said, but without rancour. Indeed, he had smiled. "I've seen that look before. I think you'll do. But perhaps one day you'll be good enough to explain to me why a Troon is habitually thrown into a form of hypnotic trance at the thought of space." He rose. Ticker jumped up, quickly. "Remember the security—this is *top* secret. The kind of thing you would not let even your wife guess — if, of course, you were so fortunate as to have one. You appreciate that?"

"I do, sir."

"Good-bye, then—er—Tick-er. And good luck."

Ticker had thanked him in a not quite steady voice.

Afterwards, in the first convenient saloon-bar, with a whiskey in front of him, he pulled the special marriage-license out of his pocket, and considered it again. He wished now that he had not been so carried away; that he had listened with more care to what the old boy had been telling him. Something about a conditioning course of twelve weeks, and studying the space-station, both in

plan and mock-up. And something about a bit of leave, too. Could that be right? After all, if they had some of the sections up there already, wouldn't they be about finished by the time he was trained and ready to go? He was momentarily alarmed—until his common-sense asserted itself: you couldn't just throw the pieces of a space-station up into the sky and let them come together. Every part must be ferried there, laboriously, monotonously, very, very expensively, and in quite small bits at a time. It would be far and away the most costly structure ever built. There would have to be heaven knew how many journeys up there before they had enough even to start on the assembly. Thinking of only that aspect of the problem caused him to swing gloomily to the other extreme—why, it was more likely to take years before it could be fully assembled and in working order. They would most probably seem to be very long years.

He dredged around in his mind for what the old boy had said about spells of duty: four weeks on, four weeks off—though that was hypothetical at present, and might need modification in the light of experience. All the same, the

intention sounded generous enough, not bad at all . . .

He returned his attention to the marriage license in his hand. There could be no doubt that from an official point of view, no such document should exist—on the other hand, if an air marshal chose to reveal clearly what he thought of the ban . . . With such eminence on his side, even though unofficially . . .

Well, why delay? He'd got the job . . .

He folded the paper carefully, and restored it to his pocket. Then he strode purposefully to the telephone-box . . .

Ticker, standing in the mess-room of the hulk, and gazing out of the window, took his breakfast gloomily.

The hulk, as it had become known, even on official memos, was the one habitable spot in thousands of miles of nothing. It was the local office of works, and also the hostel for the men serving their tour of duty. Down its shadow-side, windows ran almost the full length, giving a view of the assembly area. The few ports to sunward were kept shuttered. On the outer sunside of the hull was mounted a ring of parabolic reflectors, none more than a

foot across, and all precisely angled. When the eye of the sun shone full in the center of the ring they were inactive, but it never did for long, and a variation of a degree or two would bring one or other of the reflectors into focus, collecting intense heat. Presently, a small, invisible explosion of steam would correct the error by its recoil, and slowly the hulk would swing a little until another reflector came into focus, and give another correction. It went on all the time save for the brief "nights" in the Earth's shadow, so that the view from the leeward windows never altered: it was always the space-station assembly.

Ticker broke a roll, still warm from the oven operated by a larger reflector on the sunside. He left the larger part of it hanging in the air while he buttered the lesser. He munched absent-mindedly, and took a jet of hot coffee. Then he relinquished the plastic coffee-bottle, and let it float while he reached back the rest of the roll before it could waft further. All these actions he performed without conscious thought. They had quickly ceased to be novelties and become part of the natural background conditions to one's tour of duty—so cus-

tomary that it was, rather, a propensity to poise things conveniently in mid-air when one was at home on leave that had to be checked.

Munching his roll, Ticker continued to regard the view with distaste. However enthusiastic one might be about the project as a whole, a sense of ennui and impatience to be away inevitably set in during the last few days of a spell. It had been so on the verge of his five previous leaves, and this time, for special reasons, it was more pronounced.

Outside, the curve of the Earth made a backdrop to half the windows' span, though there was no telling which continent faced him at the moment. Cloud hid the surface and diffused the light as it did most of the time, so that he seemed to be looking, not at a world, but at a segment of a huge pearl resting in a bed of utter blackness. As a foreground, there was the familiar jumble of work in progress.

The main framework of the station had already been welded together, a wheel-like cage of lattice girders, one hundred and forty feet in diameter, and twenty-four feet thick. It sparkled in the unobstructed sunlight with a

harsh silver glitter that was trying to the eyes. A few panels of the plating were already fixed, and small, bulbous-looking figures in space-suits were maneuvering more sheets of metal into positions within the framework. The littered, chaotic impression of the whole scene was enhanced by the web of lines which criss-crossed it. Safety-lines and mooring-lines ran in every direction. There were a dozen or more from the hulk to the main assembly, and no single component, section, or instrument was without a tether to fasten it to some other. None of the lines was taut; if one became so, it remained like that for no more than a second or two. Most of them were continually moving in loops, like lazy snakes; others just hung, with barely perceptible motion. Every now and then one of the workers on the framework would pause as a case or an item of the structure as yet unused came nuzzling gently at the girders. He would give it a slight shove, and it would drift away again, its cable coiling in slow-motion behind it.

A large cylinder, part of the atmosphere regeneration plant, swam into Ticker's

view, on its way from the hulk to the assembly. The space-suited man who was ferrying it over had hooked himself to it, and was directing their mutual slow-progress by occasional, carefully aimed blasts from a wide-mouthed pistol. He and his charge were floating free in space but for his thin lifeline undulating back to the hulk. There was no sense whatever that all this was taking place as they hurtled round the Earth at a speed of thousands of miles per hour. One was no more aware of it than one was of the pace at which the Earth hurtles round the sun.

Ticker paused in his eating to appreciate the skill of the pistol user; it looked easy, but everyone who had ever tried it knew that it was a great deal easier to set oneself and the load spinning giddily all ways over. That did not happen so often now that the really ham-handed had been weeded out, but a little misjudgment could start it in a moment. He grunted approval, and went on eating, and reflecting . . .

Four days now, four more days, and he would be back home again . . . And how many spells before it would

be finished? he wondered. They were holding a sweep on that, with quite a nice prize. The schedules drawn up in comfortable offices back on Earth had gone to pieces at once. In real experience of the conditions progress with the earlier stages had been a great deal slower than the estimates had reckoned. Tricks, techniques, and devices had to be evolved to meet difficulties that the most careful consideration had overlooked. There had also been two bad holdups: one, because someone in logistics had made a crass error in the order of despatch, the other on account of a parcel of girders that had never arrived, and was now presumably circling the Earth as a lonely satellite on its own account—if it had not shot away into space.

Working in weightless conditions had also been more troublesome than they had expected. It was true that objects of great bulk and solidity could be shifted by a touch, so that mechanical handling was unnecessary; but, on the other hand, there was always the "equal and opposite reaction" to be considered and dealt with. One was forever seeking anchorage and purchase before any

force whatever could be applied. The lifetime habit of depending on one's weight was only slightly less than an instinct; the mind went on assuming that weight, just as it went on trying to think in terms of "up and down" until it had been called to order innumerable times.

Ticker left off watching the guided drift of the cylinder, and took a final jet of coffee. He looked at the clock. Still half an hour to go before the shift changed; twenty minutes before he needed to start getting into his space suit and testing it. He lit a cigarette, and because there was nothing else to do, found himself moodily contemplating the scene outside, once more. The cigarette was half finished when the ship's speaker system grated, and announced:

"Mr. Troon please call at the radio cabin. Radio message for Mr. Troon, please."

Ticker stared at the nearest speaker for an apprehensive moment, and then ground out the remains of his cigarette against the metal wall. With a clicking and scraping of magnetic soles he made his way out of the mess-room. In the passage, he disregarded the rules, and sent himself scudding along with a shove.

He caught the radio-cabin's door handle and grounded his feet in one complicated movement. The radio operator looked up.

"Quick work, Ticker. Here you are." He handed over a folded piece of paper.

Ticker took it in a hand that irritated him by shaking slightly. The message was brief. It said simply:

"Happy birthday from Laura and Michael."

He stood staring at it for some seconds, and then wiped his hand across his forehead. The radio man looked at him thoughtfully.

"Funny things happen in space," he remarked. "Must be quite six months since you last had a birthday. Many happy returns, all the same."

"Thank you very much," said Ticker vaguely, and pulled himself out of the cabin.

Outside he stood reading the short message again.

Michael, they had decided, if it were a boy: Anna, for a girl. But early, by at least a fortnight. Still, what did that matter?—except that he had hoped to be on hand. The important thing was "happy birthday," which meant "both doing well."

He became untranced suddenly, and pushed back into the radio-cabin. The dressing-

bell for the next shift went while he was scribbling his reply. A few moments later he was whizzing down the passage, headed for the suit-store.

When the Ticker's turn came, he stepped to the edge of the open airlock, clipped the eye of his short lead round the guide-line, and then with a two-legged push-off against the side of the hulk, sent himself shooting out along the line towards the assembly. Practice had given all of them a pride in their ability to deal dexterously with the conditions; a quick twist, something like that of a falling cat, brought his feet round to act as buffers at the end of his journey. He unhooked from the guide line, and hooked on to a local lifeline, obeying the outside worker's Rule Number One—that he should never for a moment work unattached. Then he pushed across to the far side of the frame where assembly was going on. One of the workers there saw him coming, and turned his head towards him so that his tight-beam radio sounded in Ticker's helmet louder than the all-round reception. His words were clear.

"All yours," he said. "And

welcome to it. This plate's a rough one."

Ticker came up to him. They exchanged lines.

"Be seeing you," said the other, and gave a yank on the line which took him back the way Ticker had come. Ticker shook his new safety-line to send it looping out of his way, and turned to give his consideration to the plate.

The new shift adjusted their general intercom radios to low power so that they could converse comfortably between themselves. They noticed the progress made since their last spell, compared it with the plan, identified the sections at hand, and started in.

Ticker looked his plate over, and then twisted it so that the markings lined up. It was not such a tough one after all, and slipped quite easily into place. He was not surprised. One got tired, and not infrequently a little stupid, by the end of a shift.

With the plate fixed, he paused, looking out at Earth with his eyeshield raised so that he saw it fully, in all its brilliance—a great shimmering globe that filled half the sky. Quite extensive patches here and there were free of cloud now, and through them there was blue; the sea, per-

haps—and then again, perhaps not, for whenever one saw the surface it looked blue, just as the blackness of space seen from the Earth in daylight looked blue.

Somewhere over there, on that great shining ball, he now had a son. The idea came to him as a marvel. He could picture Laura smiling as she held the baby to her. He smiled to himself, and then chuckled. He had smuggled himself a family in spite of the regulations, and if they did find out now—he shrugged. And anyway, he had a well-grounded suspicion that he was not the only family man among his supposedly celibate companions. He did not underestimate the Security boys; he simply thought it likely that others besides the air marshal found a blind eye convenient. In just four days more—A nudge at his back interrupted him. He turned to find another plate that someone had pushed along for his attention. Gripping a girder between his knees for anchorage, he started to twist it into position.

Half an hour later a tight-beam radio voice from the hulk overrode their local conversation.

"Unidentified object coming up," it announced, and gave a constellation bearing. The working party's heads turned towards Aries. The great stars flaring there against the multitudinous speckling of the rest looked no different from usual.

"Not a dispatch, you mean?" someone asked.

"Can't be. We've had none notified."

"Meteor?" someone else suggested, with a trace of uneasiness.

"We don't think so. There's been a slight change of course since radar picked it up a couple of hours ago. That seems to rule out meteors."

"Can't you get the telescope on it?"

"Only for a glimpse. The damned hulk's hunting too much, we're trying to steady her up."

"Could it be that parcel of girders, do you think? The lot that went astray. Couldn't it be that its homing gear has just got the range of us?"

"Might be, I suppose," admitted the voice from the hulk. "It's certainly got a line straight on us now. If it is, the proximity gear should stop it and hold it about a couple of miles off, and you'll need to send somebody out with a line to make it fast.

Plenty of time to see about that later. We'll keep you informed, once we can get this damned tub steady enough to keep the glass on it."

His wave cut off, and the assembly party, after vainly scanning the Aries region again, turned back to their work. Nearly an hour passed before the voice from the hulk spoke once more.

"Hullo there, Assembly!" it said, and without waiting for acknowledgement, went on: "There's something damned funny about that thing in Aries. It certainly isn't the girder package. We don't know what it is."

"Well, what's it look like?" inquired one of the working party, patiently.

"It's—er—well, it's like a large circle, with three smaller circles set at thirds round the perimeter."

"You don't say!"

"Well, that's what we see, damn it! The thing's head on to us. The circles may be mile-long cylinders, for all we can tell."

Again the helmeted heads of the working party turned towards Aries.

"Can't see anything. Is it blasting?"

"There's no sign of blast. It looks as if it's free-falling at

us. Just a minute—" He broke off. Five minutes passed before he came in again. This time his tone was more serious.

"We radioed a description to base, asking for info. and identification. Their reply is just in. It reads: 'No repeat no dispatch you since Number 377K four days ago stop Design of object as described not repeat not known here stop Pentagon states not repeat not known them stop consider possible craft/misile hostile stop treat as hostile taking all precautions ends.'"

For some moments no one spoke. The helmets of the working party turned as they looked at one another in astonishment.

"Hostile! For God's sake! Why, every bloody thing out here's hostile," somebody said.

"Precautions!" said another voice. "What precautions? What is there?"

Ticker inquired:

"Have we any interception missiles?"

"No," said the voice from the hulk. "They're scheduled, but they are away down the fitting-out list yet."

"Hostile?" murmured another voice. "But who?"

"Who do you think? Who'd

rather we didn't have a station out here?"

"But 'hostile,'" the man said again. "It would be an act of war—to attack us, I mean."

"Act of nothing," said the second man. "Who even knows we're up here, except the Department; and now, apparently, the Other Fellows. Say we were attacked, and blown up—what'd happen? Sweet damn all. Nothing but hush from both sides. Not even denials . . . just hush."

"Everybody seems to be taking a lot for granted, considering that nobody even knows what the thing is," someone pointed out.

That, Ticker admitted, was true enough, but somewhat legalistic, for it was difficult to believe that anything could happen to be travelling this particular section of space by sheer accident, and if it were not accidental, then it followed that the intention of any visiting object that did not originate with their Department must be either observatory, or hostile.

He turned his head again, surveying the myriad suns that flared in the blackness. The first comment had been right; it was *all* hostile. For a moment he felt that hostil-

ity all about him more keenly than at any time since he had first forced himself to push out of the hulk's airlock into nothingness. His memory of that sensation had been dulled, but now, abruptly, he was the intruder again; the presumptuous creature thrusting out of his natural element; precariously self-launched among a wrack of perils. Odd, he thought, in a kind of parenthesis, that it should need the suspicion of human hostility to reawaken the sense of the greater hostility constantly about them. Odd, indeed.

He became conscious that the others were still talking. Someone had inquired about the object's speed. The bulk was replying:

"Difficult to estimate more than roughly, head on, but doesn't seem to be high, relative to our own. Certainly unlikely to be more than two hundred miles an hour difference, we judge—could well be less. You ought to be able to see it soon. It's starting to catch the earthlight."

There was no sign of it in the Aries sector yet. Somebody said:

"Should we get back aboard, Skip?"

"No point in it . . . It wouldn't help at all if that thing

doss have a homer set on the hulk."

"True," agreed someone, and sang gently: " 'Dere's no hidin' place out here.' "

They went on working, casting occasional glances into the blackness. Ten minutes later, two men exclaimed simultaneously; they had caught one small, brief flare among the stardust.

"Starboard jet correcting course," said the voice from the hulk. "That settles one thing. It's live, and it is homing on us. Swinging now. It'll recorrect in a moment."

They watched intently. Presently, nearly all of them caught a glimpse of the little jet of flame that steadied the object's swing. A man swore:

"Damn it! And us here, like sitting pigeons. One little guided missile to meet it. That's all that's needed. Pity one of the Department's great brains didn't allow for that, isn't it?"

"What about an oxygen tube?" someone suggested. "Fix up one of the dispatch homers on it, and let it jet itself along till they meet."

"Good idea—if we had a day or so to fix the homer," agreed another.

Presently the object caught more of the earthlight, and

they were able to keep its location marked, though not yet able to distinguish its shape. A consultation went on between the leader of the working party and the commander of the hulk. It was decided not to take the party inboard. If the thing were indeed a missile and set to explode on contact or at close proximity, then the situation would be equally hopeless wherever one was; but should it, on the other hand, fail to explode on contact and simply cause impact damage to the hulk, it might be useful to have the party outside, ready to give what help it could.

On that decision, the men in space-suits started to push themselves off, and drift through the web of girders towards the hulkward side of the assembly. There they exchanged their local safety-lines for others attached to the hulk, and were ready to pull themselves across, if necessary.

They waited in an uneasy group, a surrealist cluster of grotesque figures anchored to the framework at eccentric angles by their magnetic soles while they watched the oncoming object, the "craft/-missile" grow slowly larger.

Soon they could distinguish the outline described; three

small circles set about a larger. It was from the small circles that a correcting puff of flame came now and then.

"It's my guess, from the general look of the thing, and its slow speed," the hulk commander's voice said, dispassionately, "that it's half-missile, half-mine; a kind of hunting mine. I'd guess, too, by the way it is aligned on us that it is a contact type. Might be chemical, or nuclear—probably chemical; if it were nuclear a proximity fuse would be good enough. Besides, a nuclear explosion would be detectable from Earth. With a chemical explosion out here you'd want all the concentration of force you can get—hence contact."

No one seemed disposed to question the commander's deductions. There could be no doubt that it was aligned on them. The swinging was so slight that they could see no more than the head-on view.

"Estimated relative speed about one hundred and twenty miles an hour," added the commander.

Slow, Ticker thought, very slow—probably to keep maneuverability in case of evasive action by its target. There was nothing one could do but stand there, and wait for it.

"E.T.A. now five minutes," the voice from the hulk told them, calmly.

They waited.

Ticker found a new understanding of the stringent security regulations. Hitherto, he had taken it for granted that their purpose was to preserve the lead. Clearly, once it should be known that any nation had a space-station under construction, those who had it only in the drawing-board stage would press on, and the pace would grow warmer. The best way to avoid that was secrecy, and if necessary to show astonishment that any such device was being seriously contemplated. That had seemed reasonable; there was nothing to be gained by creating a situation where construction would have to be rushed, and possibly a lot might be lost by it. The thought of an attack on the station before it was even finished had never occurred to him.

But if this were indeed a missile, and if it should get the hulk, nobody would survive. And if the Department were to be stung into denouncing the aggression? Well, the Other Fellows would just shrug and deny. "What, us! Why, we never even knew

it existed. Obviously an accident," they would say. "An accident which has now been followed by a vicious and despicable slander in an effort to cover up those responsible."

"Three minutes," said the commander.

Ticker took his eyes from the "craft-missile" and looked about him. His gaze loitered on the moon, a clear, sharp coin, recently risen from behind the blue pearl of Earth. Scarred but serene, it hung on the sky; a silver medal, still waiting to be won. The next leap.

First there had been this little hop of ten thousand miles to make a stepping-stone for the leap of two hundred and twenty-four thousand miles, more or less—and then, not in his time, but someday, there would be still greater leaps beyond. For him, for now, the moon would be enough.

"The moon," murmured Ticker. "The moon on the one hand, the dawn on the other: the moon is my sister, the dawn is my brother."

Suddenly he was swept with a shaking anger. A fury against stupidity and littleness, against narrow, scheming minds that were ready to wreck the greatest adventure of all, as a political move.

What would happen now if their work were destroyed? The cost had been in proportion to the ambition. If all this were lost, would the government be willing, could they even afford, to make a new allocation, and start again? Might it not be that, with such an example, all the rival nations would content themselves with arrangements to blow any other attempted space-stations out of existence? Would that be the end of the great adventure—to be kept earthbound by stalemate and futility . . . ?

"Two minutes," said the voice.

Ticker looked at the missile again. It was swinging a little more now, enough to give glimpses of length, instead of a flat diagram of circles. He watched it curiously. There was no doubt that the roving action was increasing. Correction and re-correction were stronger and more frequent.

"What's happening to it now?" a voice asked. "Kind of losing its touch, isn't it?"

They stared at it in horrid fascination, watching the yawing motion grow wider while the correcting jets spat more fiercely and rapidly. Soon it was swinging so much that they were getting broad-

side views of it—a fat, droplet-shaped body, buttressed by three smaller droplet shapes which housed its driving tubes. The small correcting tubes, so busily employed at this moment, branched laterally in radial clumps from the main-tube nacelles. Its method of working was obvious. Once the homing device had found a line on the target, the main tubes would fire to give directional impetus. Then, either to keep down to maneuverable speed, or simply to economize, they would cut out, leaving it to coast easily to the target while the bomber kept it on course by correcting touches from the side tubes. Less obvious, was what had got into it now, and was causing it to bear down on them in a wildly drunken wobble.

"Why the devil should it go nuts and start 'hunting' at this stage?" muttered the leader of the working party.

"That's it," said the commander from the hulk, with a sudden hopeful note in his voice. "It has gone nuts; all bewitched and bewildered. It's the masses, don't you see? The mass of the hulk is about the same as that of the assembly and parts now. The thing is approaching on a line where they are both equidis-

tant. Its computers are fooled: they can't decide which to go for. It would be bloody funny if it weren't serious. If it can't decide in another few seconds at that speed it'll overshoot any possibility of correcting in time."

They kept on watching the thing tensely. It had, in fact, already lost a little speed, for it was now yawing so widely that the steering tubes' attempts to correct the swing were having some braking effect. For half a minute there was silence. Then someone breathed out, noisily.

"He's right, by heaven! It is going to miss," he said.

Other held breaths were released, and the earphones sounded a huge, composite sigh of relief. It was no longer possible to doubt that the missile would pass right between the hulk and the assembly.

In a final desperate effort to steady up, the port tubes fired a salvo that spun it right round on its own axis as it hurtled along.

"Bloody thing's started waltzing now," observed a voice.

Still wobbling wildly it careened on, in a flaring, soundless rush. Closer it reeled, and closer, until it was

whirling madly past, between them and the hulk.

Ticker did not see what happened next. There was a sudden violent shock which banged his head against the inside of his helmet, and turned everything into dancing lights. For a few seconds he was dazed. Then it came to him that he was no longer holding on to the framework of the assembly. He groped, and found nothing. With an effort, he opened his eyes, and forced them into focus. The first thing they showed him was the hulk and the half-built space-station dwindling rapidly in the distance.

Ticker kicked wildly, and managed to turn himself round, but it took him several moments to grasp what had happened. He found that he was floating in space in company with a collection of minor parts of the assembly and two other space-suited men, while, close by, the missile, now encumbered with a tangle of lines, was still firing its steering tubes while it cavorted and spun in an imbecilic fashion. By degrees he perceived that the missile had in its passage managed to entangle itself in a dozen or more tethers and safety-lines, and torn them away, together

with whatever happened to be attached to them.

He closed his eyes for a moment. His head throbbed. He fancied that it was bleeding on the right side. He hoped the cut was small; if there was much blood it might float around loose in his helmet and get into his eyes. Suddenly the commander's voice in the phone said:

"Quiet everyone." It paused, and went on: "Hullo, hullo there! Calling you three with the missile. Are you all right? Are you all right?"

Ticker ran his tongue over his lips, and swallowed.

"Hullo, Skipper. Ticker here. I'm all right, Skip."

"You don't sound so all right, Ticker."

"Bit muzzy. Knocked my head on my helmet. Better in a minute."

"What about the other two?"

A groggy voice broke in:

"Nobby here, Skipper. I'm all right, too—I think. Been sick as a dog—not funny at all. Don't know about the other. Who is it?"

"Must be Dobbin. Hullo there, Dobbin! Are you all right?"

There was no reply.

"It was a hell of a jerk, Skipper," said the groggy voice.

"How's your air?"

Ticker looked at the dials.

"Normal supply, and reserve intact," he said.

"My reserve isn't registering. Fractured, maybe, but I've got nearly four hours," said Nobby.

"Better cut loose, and make your way back by hand tubes," said the commander. "You right away, Nobby. Ticker, you've got more air. Can you reach Dobbin? If you can, link him on to you, and bring him back with you. Think you will be able to do it without danger?"

"Shouldn't be difficult, I think."

"Look, Skip—" Nobby began.

"That's an order, Nobby," the commander told him briefly.

Kicking himself over, Ticker was able to see one of the space-suited figures fumbling at its belt. Presently the safety-line floated free, though the figure still kept along in company. It drew the pistol-like hand-tube from the holster, and held it in front with both hands, kicking a little as it maneuvered to get the hulk dead behind it in the tube's mirror-sights. Then the tube flared, and the figure holding it dropped

away, slowly at first, then with increasing speed.

"Be seeing you, Ticker," said its voice. "Bacon and eggs?"

"Done both sides, mind," Ticker told him.

He drew his own tube. When he had the second space-suited figure in the mirror, he gave the briefest possible touch on the trigger to set himself drifting towards it. A few moments later he reported:

"I'm afraid old Dobbin's through, Skip. It was quick, though. Bloody great rip in the left leg of his suit. Damn bad luck. Shall I bring him back?"

The commander hesitated a moment.

"No, Ticker," he decided. "It'd just mean an additional hazard for you. Dobbin wouldn't want that. No, cast off his line and let him go, poor chap. Take his reserve air bottle, though—and his tube, too. It'll help you to catch up on Nobby."

There was a brief silence, then:

"That's funny," Ticker murmured.

"What's funny?" demanded the commander.

"Just a minute, Skip."

"What is it, Ticker?"

"The lines have tightened,

Skipper. A minute ago, we and the odd bits were all in a clump, with the missile acting daft alongside. Now it's steadied up, seems to be pulling away. Hell, this is confusing—you aren't where you ought to be, either. The—oh, I get it. The thing's turning; swinging us round after it . . . I'm letting old Dobbin go now . . .” There was a pause. “He's drifting off on a different line, away from me. The thing must be making a wide turn, I think. Difficult to tell just what it is doing; it's giving lots of little bursts as it steadies up. I don't care much for this, Skipper. All the towed bits, including me, have swung together in a jumble.”

“Better cast off now, and shove yourself clear.”

“Just a minute, Skip. I want to see—” His voice tailed away. “Yes, yes, she is. She's pulling, pulling steadily round . . .”

Ticker was hanging out at the end of his lifeline, watching the constellations wheel slowly, and twisting slowly himself, which made it the more confusing.

The random element introduced into the missile by the conflict of purpose had been sorted out. It was coordinated

again, and its change of direction was steady, smooth, and purposeful. It was, in fact, back on the job. Its radar had searched for, and found, the target it had missed in its temporary derangement, and was bringing it round to bear once more. Somewhere inside the fat metal droplet there were relays ready to go in once it was steady in the aim; a brief burst on the main tubes would send it back to the attack . . .

“Oh, Lord!” exclaimed Ticker, and began to haul himself hand over hand along his safety-line, shoving aside the trailing flotsam of assembly items as he went, and making for the missile itself.

“What's that about? Why haven't you cast off yet?” inquired the commander.

Ticker did not reply. He had come close to the missile, swung a little out from it by the continuing turn, but able to reach it. Presently he could touch it, and brought round a leg to kick himself clear of the steering-tubes. He pulled himself forward on the length of line remaining, and caught hold of the member which joined one of the nacelles to the main body. It was round all three of these members that the lines had tangled as the missile had

swept past the assembly, and he tied his safety-line short to a loop in the tangle that looked as if it would hold.

"What the devil are you doing, Ticker?" asked the commander.

"I'm aboard the missile, Skipper," Ticker told him.

"For heaven's sake—! You mean you're on the damned thing? Look, I told you to cast off. Do I have to make it an order?"

"I hope you won't, Skipper, because I rather think that if you did, and if I obeyed it, I'd very likely have nowhere to go."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, it looks to me as if this thing is in the process of getting round to have another go at you."

"Is it, by hell! You sure of that, Ticker?"

"'Fraid so. Don't see what else it can be doing. It's certainly making a steady arc, and if that's its game, this seems to be as good a place as any."

"Wouldn't be my choice. What do you mean?"

"Well, if I'd stayed where I was I'd be fried when it fires its main tubes. And if I cast off now and it does go for you, I stand to die slowly in a space-suit. Not nice, at all.

Whereas this way I get a free ride home. If it misses you, I can roll off: if it doesn't, well, it'll be the same for all of us . . ."

"That's a lot more logical than agreeable. What's it doing now?"

"Still coming round. You lie to port as we go. About twenty degrees more to swing yet. You should be able to observe easily."

"We've got you on the radar, all right, but we can't bring the glass to bear so far to sunward."

"I see. Try to keep you informed," said Ticker.

He worked forward on the metal body. There was enough iron in it to give some traction for his magnetic soles. "Turn" still gradual, but steady," he reported. "This thing has a number of knobs and protuberances and so on round the nose," he added. "Five major and several minor. God knows what they are. One or more must be radar."

"With limited range, obviously," said the commander. "Must be, or it would go off chasing the moon, or the Earth, instead of us. That looks as if they must know our distance and the plane of our orbit pretty accurately.

damn them. Given that, it wouldn't be too difficult to make it sure to find us sooner or later. If you can sort out which is the radar, it might be helpful to have a good bash at it."

"Trouble is they aren't like anything I've ever seen," complained Ticker. "It'd be just too bad if the one I bashed turned out to be a fuse."

"Take your time, and make sure. How's she bearing now?"

"Nearly on. Three or four degrees more."

He slid back a bit to a position where he could brace himself on a nacelle member. The intermittent vibration from the starboard tubes ceased, and a new tremor ran through the missile as the port tubes fired to check her.

"She's round now," he told the commander. "Lined up on you, and steadying."

He waited tensely, gripping with arms and knees as best he could. The main tubes spurted briefly. He felt the missile surge forward. There was a jerk as the lines to the flotsam tightened, and checked it. The tubes fired again. The missile and its tow jerked to and fro on their loose coupling, but only one of the

lines parted, to let a girder section spin off into space on its own. The rest joggled, and the lines looped about until presently the whole conglomeration was in motion on the new line, headed now for the distant hulk, but at a speed somewhat below that of the missile's former attack.

"On our way now, Skip," Ticker reported. "I'll get forward again, and try to see about that radar."

On the nose once more, he tried shielding the protuberances in turn with his gloved hands. There was no apparent effect; certainly no tendency to deviate from the course. He slackened off the life-line a little, and hung over the front to shield as many as possible at once with his body, also without noticeable result. Again he examined the projections. One of them looked as if it might be a small solar-energy cell, but the rest were unidentifiable. He was sure only that some of them must be relaying information to the controls. He sat back, astride the nose of the missile, and feeling the need of a cigarette as he had seldom felt it before.

"Got me beat," he admitted. "I just don't know, Skip. Almost any of them might be any damned thing."

He turned his attention to the spangled blackness about him. The hulk and the assembly, lying dead ahead, were shining more brightly than anything but the sun itself.

"One thing, Skipper," he said. "It won't be like the other try. The turn's brought it round so that you and the assembly are almost in line from here."

"There must be some way of disabling, or disarming the brute. Don't any of those projections unscrew?"

"A couple of them look as if they ought to, but I've no spanners, and I lost the grips when I was snatched off."

Moving forward again, he braced himself as well as he could, and tried to unscrew a graspable portion with his gloved hands. It was a waste of effort. He gave up, and gazed ahead while he recovered his breath. The missile was steady on its course, with barely a tremor of correction to be felt. Distance was difficult to judge but he guessed that he could not be much more than twenty miles from the hulk. 'Not many minutes . . .

Ticker became aware of sweat trickling down his forehead, and stinging in the corners of his eyes. He shook his head, and worked his eye-

brows to try to get rid of the drops. Presently he slithered clumsily back to the member connecting the port nacelle. He sat on it, lashing himself there as best he could with the life-line. He pressed back on the main body, bracing his feet against the nacelle itself. He drew the two hand-tubes, his own and Dobbin's. He checked their power settings, and then held them on either side of him, their wide mouths pointing outwards, their butts firmly grounded against the metal casing at his back. Like that, he waited.

"Ticker. Bale out now," said the commander.

"I told you, Skip. I'm not for dying slowly in a space-suit."

The hulk, and the assembly beyond it, seemed to be rushing towards him now. His spine was prickling, partly with sweat, partly with the knowledge of the explosive just behind it. He found himself becoming more conscious of it, crawlingly aware of the vast tearing power held in a thin shell, waiting for the impact that would release it. The sweat ran out of every pore, soaking his clothes.

He sat with his head turned to the right, watching the

hulk grow bigger and nearer from eyes that stung with salt. "Not too soon," he told himself. "It mustn't be too soon." But it mustn't be too late, either. He was aware of the commander's voice in the phone again, but he took no notice of it. Would one-mile distance do?—Or would that not be soon enough? No, it should give him just time enough at the rate he was going. He would make it one mile as near as he could judge . . . He went on watching, both hands clenched on the tube grips . . .

Must be about a couple of miles now . . .

He set his teeth, and pulled both triggers right back for a moment . . . The hulk seemed to slide to the left as the missile kicked over more sharply than he had expected. The thing keeled for a moment, like a dancer caught off balance. Then the steering tubes fired a correcting blast. The nose swung back on to the target, and then beyond it. The tubes on the near side fired to correct the over-swing; at the same moment Ticker pulled both triggers back, and held them there. With the combined blast reinforcing her new backswing, the missile leapt sideways

and swung broadside to her course at the same time. The constellations whirled round Ticker's head. He looked wildly round for the hulk, and found it back over his left shoulder—and not much more than half a mile away. He prayed that there was not time enough for a correction . . .

An air missile, with air to grip, and fins to grip it, might have managed a quick correction; but in space, where every movement is a delicate matter of thrust and counter-thrust, time, too, is a highly important factor; oscillation cannot be killed at a stroke, lost equilibrium cannot be regained in a moment . . .

The angle of diversion needed to get back on course grew more acute every second. Ticker knew suddenly that the thing could not do it. Only the main drive could have exerted enough force to jump it back in time to hit—and experience showed that the main drive liked to be steady in the aim before it fired.

But the side-tubes tried. Ticker braced himself where he sat while the heavens reeled as the missile spun. Then the hulk rushed past in a blur, fifty yards away . . .

"Done it, by Jiminy! Bloody good show, Ticker!" said a voice.

"Quiet there!" snapped the commander. "Ticker, that was magnificent. Now come off it. Bale out quick."

Ticker, still held by his line, relaxed, feeling all in. The missile, still swinging from side to side, scudded on with him into space.

"Ticker, do you hear me? Bale out!" repeated the commander.

Ticker said wearily:

"I hear you, Skip. But there won't be enough power left in these tubes to get me back to you."

"Never mind. Use what there is as a brake. We'll fetch you in. But get clear of it now!"

There was a pause. Ticker's tired voice said:

"Sorry, Skip. But we don't know what this thing is going to do next, do we?"

"For heaven's sake, man—"

"Sorry, Skip. Mutiny, I'm afraid."

Ticker rested as he was, with his eyes closed. The sight of the constellations swooping to the missile's swings was making him feel sick. He was tired out, his head ached badly, he was soaked through with sweat, it was an effort to think. He sat

as he was until he became aware that the pull on the line that held him in place had changed, and become constant. He opened his eyes, and found himself looking full at the moon.

It was sliding slowly leftwards, and the great curve of the Earth was rising on his right.

"She's going about again," he said drearily. "I wonder if these babies ever run out of fuel?"

Looking down, he found that he was still gripping the hand-tubes. He let them go, and float on their safety-cords while his gloved hands fumbled at the knot of the line which held him. He managed to slacken it off, and dragged himself back on to the main body again. The thing was fairly steady once more, with the starboard tubes firing now and then to turn it; there could be little doubt that it was in the process of coming round for yet another attack. He pulled himself forward on to the nose again, and sat astride of it, holding on to the projecting knobs.

Perched there, and summoning up his strength, he looked about him. Under his left foot lay the pearl-like

Earth, with the night-shadow beginning to creep across her. The sun blazed high to his right. Up to the left the pallid moon lay in a bed of jet scattered with diamond dust.

Lower to his left, but sliding slowly round towards the front, floated the hulk and the glittering spiderwork of girders that would one day be the space-station.

Once more he turned his eyes down to the great globe creeping past his left foot. He watched it steadily for some moments; then he lifted his right hand, and turned the air supply up a little.

"Skipper?" he inquired.

"Receiving you, Ticker," acknowledged the commander. "We've just managed to get the glass on you. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to have a shot at disabling the thing, Skip. I think the line is to have a bash at this short, thick rod-thing in front of me. Can you see it?"

"Yes. I can see it. Might be anything. You're satisfied it's part of the radar gear?"

"Obvious, Skipper."

"Ticker, you're lying. Leave it alone."

"Might be able to dent it a bit. Enough to mess it up."

"Ticker—"

"I know what I'm doing. Skip. Here goes."

Ticker hooked his toes under two of the projections, and gripped with his knees, for the best possible purchase. He took up the hand-tubes, one in each hand, and slammed away at the short, thick rod with all his might. Presently he paused, panting.

"No damned weight. Like hitting with matchsticks," he complained. "Not a mark on it."

He turned the air on a little more, and screwed up his eyes to squeeze the sweat out of them. The missile was still coming round in its big curve. Twenty degrees more would bring it on to the line of attack again.

"Going to try another of them this time," he said, lifting the tubes once more.

Through the telescope the commander watched him start to belabor one of the more slender projections: from the right, from the left, from the right, from the . . .

There was a flash so brilliant that it stung his eyes.

That was all: a vivid, silent flash, shining for its brief moment as brightly as the sun . . .

Then, where it had been,

the glass showed nothing but empty darkness, with small, uncaring stars, thousands of light-years beyond . . .

The air marshal spread the message on his desk, and studied it for several long, thoughtful moments.

His mind went back to the night fifty years ago when the other Ticker had not come back. The same job for grandson as for grandfather. Only it had been easier the first time, with a war on, and the news half-expected. He felt old. He ~~was~~ old. Too old, perhaps. If they had not changed the regulations he would have been on the shelf ten years ago at his age . . .

Still, here he was. And he'd tell her himself. Tell this poor girl—just as he had told the other one, long ago. So pitiously little he could tell her . . . Lost on a secret mission . . . So cruelly blank . . .

She would know later on, of course—when Security considered it safe. Oh, yes,

she should know. He'd see to that. He would throw all his weight there . . . For sheer cold courage . . . Nothing less than a V.C. . . . Nothing less . . .

He looked back at the security report for the previous day.

"Subject dispatched radio to Troon. Message: 'Happy birthday from Laura and Michael.' (N.B. Presumed code reference to subject's birth of child, male, on previous evening. Supporting this: (a) Troon's birthday 8th May; (b) his radio reply: 'I love you both.')

The air marshal sighed, and shook his head in a philosophic manner.

"But at least she has the boy," he murmured. "And she knows he knew about the boy . . . I'm glad he did . . . The old Ticker never even knew there was to be a child . . .

"I hope they meet up there . . . Ought to get on well together. . . ."

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For twenty years the "service industry" has been growing with fantastic speed. Let the chains have the retail store business. Even a small business providing an unusual service can bring profits to the individual that were unheard of in the old days. And, unlike the chains, the service business today, is thriving under Franchising.

What is the difference? Just this: A chain is a large number of stores in a chain all operating under the same plan; under the

same well-known name; but are owned by one corporation. In Franchising, the individual uses tested and proven plans for starting his business and building it; he operates under a Nationally Advertised and well-known name, he has step by step guidance but he owns the business. He enjoys the advantages of chain recognition, but he keeps all the net profits for himself.

The Duraclean Franchise is such a business. No store to rent. No fixtures to buy. No inventory or stock of goods to pay for. No office or work-room required. And, no special education or experience is needed for success. Men of almost every educational level have made glowing successes with the "know-how" furnished by our Company. They've worked from their homes as all Duraclean Service is given on the premises of the customer. In the beginning they've used the family car as all equipment can be carried in the trunk. Their only investment has been a

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Dreams of others have come true
For the first time in 30 years, I've got security
without fear of losing my factory job."

H.E., Ohio

Duraclean is one of the least expensive businesses to get started, but has a greater potential than any other."

R.H.R., Alaska

I have accomplished more with Duraclean in the past 5 years than in the 17 years I was working in the shop."

J.W., Pa.

importance hotels, motels, schools, shops, stores, offices, theaters, hospitals, and institutions. The commercial business is big and because much of this work can be done evenings or Saturdays, many men have started in spare time without giving up their jobs or pay checks. When they have seen from actual experience that Duraclean could pay them many times their former salaries, they have resigned the old job and become independent businessmen—with all the added respect and standing that a businessman has in his community.

If you've ever had a really strong desire to "some day own your own business" the Duraclean Franchise is well worth investigating. We have no salesmen to try to influence you. The entire Duraclean Opportunity is explained in detail in a 24-page book. This book will be mailed free to any man sincerely interested in a future of security and independence. Just your name and address is all that's needed. Send it today. After reading all the facts, if you decide to take the next step, you can write again and let us know.

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cash outlay of a little more than \$1000.

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The Prince of Mars

I, CAPTAIN DANIEL J. HANLEY, chief meteorologist of the General Rocket Corporation, had no intention of going to Mars when I stepped into the new space car and pressed gently but with finality on the gravity-screen lever.

I was conscious only of a great urge to get as far away as possible from a certain young woman who had — But why go into details about that? It is enough that I didn't fully realize what I was doing.

And as a result, here I was, the first man ever to pass beyond the stratosphere of Earth, actually hovering a scant mile above a Martian landscape, trembling with suppressed excitement and giving not a thought to the girl who had driven me to my mad, premature plunge into space.

I faced infinity with reckless abandon, and found that I liked it. What mattered it if the end did come in a day, week, month? Why, there were no days, weeks or months in interplanetary space! Only eternal, blazing noon on

one side of my tiny craft and everlasting midnight on the other, while countless galaxies gleamed upon me in new glory from all sides.

That I landed on Mars instead of some other planet was due solely to chance. In hurrying my tiny craft madly, blindly away from Earth I happened to set it on an orbit that brought it closer to Mars than to any other heavenly body. As I drew nearer, the planet grew in size and in interest, until it entirely filled the great lens of my wide-angle scope. Its mountain ranges and peculiar canals became plainly visible.

I manipulated my rocket blasts a bit and swung closer. There was no indication that the canals were man-made. Rather they seemed furrows caused by glancing blows of meteors. And there were many craters which, though small, like those of the moon, appeared to be the result of head-on meteoric impact.

As the planet grew still larger, I could see that there were no oceans and continents in the sense that we

HANLEY'S GUN ROARED AS HIS LEAF CARRIED HIM HIGH OVER THE HEADS OF HIS OPPONENTS

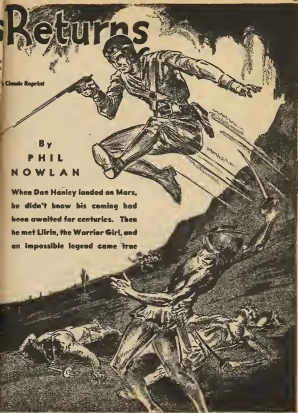


Returns

Classic Reprint

By
**PHIL
NOWLAN**

When Dan Hanley landed on Mars,
he didn't know his coming had
been awaited for centuries. Then
he met Liria, the Warrior Girl, and
an impossible legend came true



know them on Earth. Nevertheless, the divisions between the hot cups, polar caps, solid vegetation belts, canal-irrigated sections, and finally the vast and eternally dry, red equatorial belt, were clear and sharp. The northern and southern hemispheres, widely divided by this belt, seemed duplicates.

"Why not inspect the planet at close range?" I asked myself.

So here I was, staring down over a countryside such as no man on Earth had ever seen.

Through the forward port I gazed upon a country of scrubby, dwarfed, cactuslike trees and shrubs, stretching away drably to where a ribbon of water—one of those much-discussed "canals"—sparkled. To my left, toward the equatorial belt, the vegetation became more dwarfed and sparse, until its pale, yellow-green blended into the deeper, reddish tint of the arid desert.

To my right a rolling plain swelled into distant hills, heavily covered with the yellow-green foliage. On the horizon, a range of gaunt, jagged mountains flashed and shimmered like crystal in the pale, cool sunlight.

"Quantal!" I muttered. "They must be pure quartz!"

I brought my craft gently down on the bank of the little "river" that meandered along the "canal," or valley. With trembling fingers I opened the valve of one of the test chambers and watched the pressure gauge.

I had feared an uncomfortably rare air, but the gauge registered a pressure no less than that of mountainous regions at home. There was more carbon dioxide and more hydrogen, but the oxygen content was about the same as on Earth! I could leave my little metal shell and walk around on a new planet!

Excited, I threw back the hatch at the top of my little hemispherical craft and leaped out joyously. I landed, not where I expected—but fifteen or twenty feet beyond. I had forgotten that I would weigh only about a third as much as on Earth.

But with a little practice, I found I could gauge my muscular effort instinctively to the desired distance. It was a delightful amusement, leaping twenty-five or thirty feet with the effort of an eight or ten-foot jump. But finally I gave some consideration to my position.

"And now," I said myself, "here I am on an utterly strange planet. I have no idea what dangers I may have to face. I don't know whether intelligent beings live here or, if they do, what their attitude toward me might be. It might be just as well to have an 'ace in the hole.' I'll hide my ship, mark the spot well, and then if by any chance things should get too hot for me, I'll have the means in reserve to do a fade-out."

I studied the banks of the stream. Obviously the little river was at high-water mark. That was good. There would be no more powerful current than this to wash my ship away, then, for it was my intention to sink her to the middle of the stream.

Again I climbed aboard, closed the hatch. Letting my space car drift a few feet above the water, I maneuvered over the center of the stream and then submerged. The ship went about ten feet below the surface. I had previously unloaded the equipment I meant to use, so nothing remained but to put everything in order, enter the airlock, adjust the pressure, and dive down and out through the port.

I realized, as I donned my wooden shirt, leather breeches and puttees, that the sun did not shed as much warmth on Mars as on Earth. It seemed scarcely more than half the sun to which I was accustomed. As I rolled up my blankets, I had little doubt I would need them after nightfall.

As yet I had seen no sign of animal life. But there were many spots on Earth where a visitor would find none for miles. So that proved nothing. I strapped a heavy automatic to my thigh, clamped on a cartridge belt. As an extra precaution, I slipped a smaller automatic in a shoulder holster which I put on under my shirt. For the rest, I thought, my hunting knife and short-handled axe might prove serviceable.

MARKING the position of my submerged spacecraft by carefully sighting the distant mountain peaks on crossed lines, I shouldered my light pack and hiked toward the gleaming, flashing mountain range.

It was glorious to weigh no more than about sixty pounds, and yet have muscles that had been accustomed to carrying one hundred seventy. Walking did not give them the exercise they demanded after the long period cooped up in the little space ship, so I ran with exhilarating lightness, practicing long and high leaps as I went and shouting at times from sheer, unrestrained joy.

I had gone about five miles when I first saw her.

The scrubby undergrowth had given way to another cactuslike type of vegetation, the trees of Mars, slim and tall with stubby, blunt branches. They bore no leaves. Rather, both trunks and branches seemed to be leaves in themselves: pale yellow-green and semi-transparent. A thin syringe sap ran freely from one which I scored with my axe.

The sudden flash of a movement somewhere ahead of me arrested my eye. Abruptly I halted, standing motionless, alert. I saw nothing but the yellow-green trees. I shifted my axe to my left hand. Quietly my right fist rested on the butt of my automatic. I advanced, poised for instant action.

From somewhere ahead came a metallic twang. I ducked. A heavy missile chattered into the trunk of a tree directly behind me. Then a girl stopped confidently forth, about twenty feet away.

Evidently she thought she had hit me, for her first reaction was to start back at the sight of me standing there. Hastily she dropped the four-foot tube she held in her hand, and in something like a panic tugged at a kind of quiver or sash bag across her shoulder, until she held another tube pointed straight at me.

For some moments we stood motionless, gazing at

each other in amazement.

I had rather expected to find life of some sort on Mars, and was even hoping to find intelligent creatures of some sort. But to find a pretty, golden-haired Amazon, in green kilt, soft leather leggings and loose, sleeveless blouse that did not by any means conceal her slender form—well, that took my breath away!

CHAPTER II

Lifra of the Tars'Ur

AT last the significance of that tube, pointed at my chest unhesitatingly, broke through my stunned thoughts. I dropped my arm, held out my empty hands in a gesture of friendliness.

"Can't we be friends?" I smiled, knowing full well my language would not be understood, but hoping that my tone might.

Her reply, uttered in a soft, euphonious tongue, was obviously a question. And feeling a bit foolish, I tried to indicate by gestures that I could not understand her.

For a moment she watched me. A quizzical look crept into her green-blue eyes. Then she laughed and lowered the tube a bit, but quickly covered me again as I stepped forward. She was taking no chances, it seemed, for again her eyes flashed a warning as I sought to recover my arm.

She motioned me back. As I complied, she walked over and picked up the arm herself, never taking her eyes off me. Next she motioned toward my knife. I tossed it at her feet, and she picked this up also. The automatic strapped to my leg meant nothing to her, seemingly. She did not demand it.

Feeling safer now, she stood back and surveyed me speculatively. At length she motioned me to precede her in the direction of the distant mountains. This I did willingly enough, for I felt that with my two guns I could always command the situation, even if her people did not prove as friendly in their attitude as I hoped.

I had been eyeing those tubes she carried in the quiver, and had come to the conclusion, both from their appearance and their peculiar, tramping, metallic quality, that they buried their bullets by the force of a coiled spring.

As I marched on, occasionally turning to look at my fair captor, the vegetation became thicker, and the hills and ridges more pronounced. Coming to the top of one of these ridges she called out, and by gestures commanded me to turn sharply to the right. A bit later she pointed and gave a peculiar whistling signal. This was replied to from some point ahead, and we went on.

I hardly knew what I expected to see. It certainly was not the type of structure we finally came upon. Steep walls of a glassy, translucent, solid material rose to a height of fifty feet or more. At least I judged them to be solid. I could see no joints or crevices.

There was a triangular opening. Through this peculiarly shaped gateway I strode on a pavement of material similar to the wall, which was worn smoothly and deeply as though by centuries of countless feet.

The space inside the wall, I saw, was diamond-shaped, about a thousand feet long and probably three-quarters that distance at its greatest width. The entire space was paved with a solid sheet of the glassy material, in which smooth troughs or channels had been worn.

In contrast with the solid and permanent nature of the walled space, which gave evidence of high engineering skill, there was no shelter inside except some two or three dense tents, not unlike Indian tepees, of pale green leather over metal framework.

There were a score of men and women about, all garbed exactly like my captor: golden-haired, blue-eyed people of somewhat slighter build than the average on Earth, but otherwise remarkable only for the uniform perfection of their physique.

Men and women were of about the same height, none of them coming within several inches of my six feet. The men were only slightly sturdier than the women, and all seemed in perfect physical condition, like trained athletes. I did not see a fat nor a flabby individual among them.

Our appearance caused no great excitement, though a number gathered around us and my captor was questioned with mild curiosity. But they made way for us readily enough at her explanation.

Quite at ease now, she walked beside me, having sheathed her "gun," touching my arm occasionally to direct me toward a tent in the center, somewhat larger than the others. It was about thirty feet across, of a high, conical shape. A large translucent disc, set in the top of the metal framework, let in a soft light.

I don't know what she said to the blond-headed man who sat at the carved, light metal table, but from her tone and the little gesture with which she called his attention to me, it must have been something like: "Look what I found in the forest, Father!"

There ensued some rapid conversation in that peculiarly mellow tongue. Then to my considerable embarrassment they began to examine my apparel and myself with a critical scrutiny, finally motioning me outside where there was more light.

That they were both of them greatly puzzled was quite clear. At length the man, who seemed to be the head of the little community, endeavored to talk with me by signs. He placed a finger on my chest and looked questioningly at me. I guess I looked foolish, for I did not get him at first. So he pointed to himself.

"Ur Morra," he said. Then he pointed at the girl and said, "Ur Lifra."

"Oh," I nodded. "You mean those are your names." Then I pointed to myself and bowed.

"Dus—Dus Hanley—Captain Daniel J. Hanley, U. S. Army Reserve Corps, at your service."

"Daman-Uh!" said the girl softly, as though the name was somehow both familiar and amazing.

Then Ur Morrya waved his hand generally toward the people scattered about the enclosure.

"Ta a'Ur," he said. From which I surmised that the "Ur" part of their names was a clan or community designation.

I smiled and put my finger on his chest. "Morrya," I said. "Ur Morrya."

He seemed a bit taken aback at the freedom of my gesture, but smiled his assent, if a bit wryly.

THEN I turned to the girl and, suddenly curious to see what would happen, placed my hand boldly on her shoulder as I spoke her name.

For an instant Morrya was about to look out at me in fury. Liria's eyes blazed in indignant resentment. Then suddenly she blushed, and tried to act as though I had done nothing the thought unusual, while with a struggle her father strove to assume the same air.

Here was no trace of barbarians, nor of slaves; but a people of high spirit, independence, culture, and quick intelligence. I sensed that I had committed a grievous offense, which was forgiven me instantly in view of my "ignorance." I sensed too that they must regard me somewhat in the light of a guest.

Some leap of perversity led me to puzzle them still further when, after a bit, they motioned me within the tent again, where a meal was laid out on the table.

I looked curiously at the unfamiliar vessels—drums and vegetables, most of which I had never seen. There was meat, and a few of peculiar shape. All of the tableware was of metal, a pale alloy that looked like gold but was not. The platters were inlaid with intricate motifs, and there were spoons, but no knives. My hosts used the blades which they took from the sheaths at their belts.

I made an apologetic gesture and went to my little pack, which had been laid in a corner. From it I took my silver knife and fork, and returned to the table.

They strove to conceal their curiosity, but finally stared frankly. It was on the fork that their interest centered. Not only its shape seemed unfamiliar to them, but the sterling silver itself. The girl watched my use of it with a kind of fascination, then actually blushed and giggled when I handed it to her.

Her father frowned and made another serious effort to question me by gestures. At last I gathered his meaning. He wanted to know whence I had come.

I pointed upward, toward the sky. His brow increased, and he shook his head. My explanation wasn't at all satisfactory, it seemed. Nor did I wonder at this. And the thought came to me then that it would be just as well not to try to explain. I wouldn't be believed. Who on Earth, nay, would be believed if he claimed to be a Martian?

True, I might exhibit my little space-craft in substantiation of my story. But I did not know but that sooner or later my life might depend on keeping its

existence and its hiding place a secret. So I shrugged and let it go at that.

CHAPTER III

Giant Spider

NIGHT came. A new tent was erected for my use. And when at last I tired of the glory of the two Martian moons which swung low and swiftly across the scintillating heavens, and Liria had given me a curiously speculative smile of adieu, I went inside and threw myself on the pile of soft skins and silks that evidently was intended as my couch. Almost at once I slept.

The days passed swiftly. Little by little I learned their language. It was hard pulling at first, but I had always had a certain facility with strange tongues. I learned something too of Martian life and history.

Morrya, Liria's father, was Myar-Lur—supreme chief—of the Ur, a clan of a race which, like the Cosacks on Earth, was somewhat nomadic in its inclinations, and jealously guarded its tribal traditions. Morrya with his seven Myars, or sub-chiefs, was at present in the service of the Northern Cities.

For five successive years the clan had contracted with the Northern Cities to guard the Desert Gap in the Quarta Mountains and the approaches to it.

The work of the clan had centered chiefly in keeping the territory south of the Gap clear of the "dalyah," or yellow apes, beasts of almost human intelligence. These dalyahs, I gathered, possessed a higher order of mentality than any of their counterparts on Earth.

They were tallish, walked erect, but had prehensile feet. They were covered with a golden brown fur, and though larger and more muscular than Martian men, were more human than apes in build. They were omnivorous, hunted in packs, had a rudimentary language, and fashioned crude clubs and spears.

Yet they were distinctly not human, Liria informed me.

"After two or three generations of captivity," she said, "they make excellent slaves. Unless they taste blood, they can be trusted invariably to be loyal to their masters. They bring higher prices in the slave markets because they are stronger and more docile than men—that is, the domesticated ones are more docile. About two-thirds of the city populations are dalyah slaves."

"You know," Liria looked up at me shyly, "the reason I tried to shoot you that day in the forest was because I thought you were a dalyah!"

We were sitting on an outcropping of rock, a great scintillating quartz boulder, gazing down a gentle slope toward the "tunnel." There was speculation, and it seemed to me a bit of suspicion, in Liria's steady gaze.

"Why do you look at me that way, Liria?" I asked. "Because I have dark hair, unlike your people!"

I thought perhaps she had not heard me, for she did

not answer at once. For several moments she missed. "Danna-ih, you are like no living man on this world!" she finally blurted out. Then just as suddenly she was all self-made.

"I am sorry, I had no right to say such a thing. The ancient custom forbids anything that would make a guest feel uncomfortable. My offense is unpardonable."

That was my cue. "No it isn't, Litrin," I protested. "You and your people have been so kind to me that an explanation is the least—"

"No, no!" she cried, jumping up and putting her hands over her ears. "I won't listen. You mustn't tell me anything. It wouldn't—"

A weird, shrill, wailing cry somewhere down the slope in front of us interrupted her. I'm not easily startled, but for an instant I felt a chill shoot up my spine. Litrin stood an instant, rigid, motionless, staring pale and wide-eyed in the direction whence the sound had come.

"It's a birrok!" she gasped, tugging at the quiver in which she carried her bolt-hurling tubes. "Run, Danna-ih, run! You can't fight it without bolts, and even then you have to get it with the first shot, or—"

Then I saw the thing. It was a gigantic yellow-green spider. Its legs were fully twelve feet long. Suddenly it straightened them and the furry body, which had been resting close to the ground, rose as though on stilts. Clearly the thing sensed our presence and was looking for us.

Instantly those legs began to move with amazing rapidity. The body seemed to swoop down and glide swiftly toward us with an easy, undulating swing. It would be upon us in a moment. Instinctively I drew my automatic.

"Quick, Danna-ih! Run!" said Litrin sharply, and stepped between me and the poisonous monster, her tube leveled.

There was a whir and a clang. The bolt shot true toward its mark. But with unbelievable agility, the great spider leaped forward.

Litrin uttered a little cry of despair, and threw herself in front of me. I squeezed the trigger of my gun.

The shots blended into a roar as a succession of rubbing flashes leaped from the muzzle, for I emptied the whole magazine at the thing. As before, the beast leaped sharply to one side. But not quickly enough. The long legs crumpled up, and after one or two convulsive movements the thing lay still. At that, I believe it had dodged all but the first bullet.

CHAPTER IV

I Wed Litrin

LITRIN recovered before I could make up my mind to leave her long enough to go down to the stream for water.

"Wh-what was it, Danna-ih—that terrible noise?

And you really killed the birrok? Impossible! How did you do it?"

I showed her the automatic, at which she gazed fascinated as I refilled the magazine. Then she looked up at me with her big blue-green eyes.

"You could have killed me just like that the day I shot at you," she said. "And I didn't have sense enough to take that machine-thing away from you!"

"Why, yes," I laughed. "Of course I could have, but I wouldn't!"

I broke off, for Litrin did not join in my laughter. Instead there was a look of almost tragic solemnity in her eyes.

"You not only spared my life when I treated you as an enemy, but saved it as well from the terrible birrok. My life no longer belongs to me, but to you—to do with as you see fit, Danna-ih!"

She stood there, straight and slim and brave, her little jaws clenched in the effort to hold back the tears that would not be denied. Then she whirled away from me and broke into uncontrollable sobs.

I wanted to comfort her, but I was badly flustered. I knew nothing of Martian customs at all. This girl was as much of a soldier as the men of her clan. Did she mean that I had a right to command her military service, or were her words to be taken literally? Lord—was I expected to claim her as my wife!

"Litrin," I said at last, and she swung around toward me with a pathetic little air of submission. "Come here and sit down again. You must listen and hear with me while I tell you who I am."

She nodded acquiescence, dabbling a bit at her eyes. She would not look at me. And that made it hard to begin. But somehow I managed it.

"If I only had half a dozen extra arms or legs, or something," I concluded, "there'd be some excuse for your believing my story that I just dropped down here from another planet. But here we are, with not as much difference between us as there might be between a man and a girl of two different races on Earth—or on Mars, I imagine."

"It's a wild story. But it's the truth, although I can hardly expect you to believe it."

"But I do believe it," she said gently. "I've seen your space ship. I went back and found it the day after I took you to our camp. I was curious about you. I found your footprints coming from the edge of the water, and I swam out. I saw something under the water, and I dived. I did not know what it was, of course, but I knew it must contain the secret of where you came from and—and I was worried. But I didn't tell anybody."

"And I know what's worrying you now," she said, finally looking up at me with grave, serious eyes. "It's—it's me." She blushed frankly. "But we can't help it, Danna-ih, whether we like it or not. The law is:

"To him who has saved a life belongs that life and the service thereof," she quoted.

She breathed almost with a sigh. "It has been that way among the Ta'u'U for untold ages, since the days when fire rained down from the skies, gouging great scars across the face of our world, drying up the ancient oceans and destroying the Old Civilization."

"But Lirio," I protested, "I would not dream of embarrassing you, much less of making any claim upon you for what I did. I was saving my own life as well as yours. Besides, you might have killed the birrok with one of your own bolts."

"You can't get out of it that way," she said with a wan little smile. "It's the law. You saved my life. I belong to you. 'Els' and 'maybes' and 'perhapses' don't count here on Mara."

"Well," I said, "I can do with my property what I want, can't I? There's no reason why I can't give you back to yourself."

"Yes, there is. Because under the law, in a case like ours, it—means—~~it means~~—"

"Means what?" I had to ask, knowing the answer in advance.

"Marriage."

"But—but—" I objected. "Suppose I were already married."

"Then I would become your wife's slave," she explained unhappily. "And if I were already married, both my husband and I would become your slaves."

I didn't think much of that law. It seemed to have too many disadvantages.

"Do you mean to say," I demanded, "that if I were to save the life of your father, for instance, that he—the chief of your clan—would become my slave?"

"Oh, yes. That is, unless it were in battle, when all lives already belong to him anyway as commander-in-chief. In that event you could establish no claim on him. But if you were to save my father's life, as you saved mine just now, he—Myar-Lar of the Ta'u'U—could never submit to the indignity of becoming a slave."

"But how could he help it! You say it is the law, and—"

"He would kill himself," she said simply.

"Oh."

For a long time we sat without speaking. I was trying to get a mental grasp on this strange Martian custom and the problem it involved. Lirio sat dejectedly, gazing down the slope toward the undergrowth in which the dead birrok lay.

Then there came to me a thought in which it seemed there might be a gleam of hope. I put it up to Lirio.

"I'm no Uu. Therefore the laws of the Ta'u'U shouldn't apply to me," I argued.

"Yes, they do," she smiled. "We're within the treaty boundaries of the Ta'u'U. And even though—"

"This would be true if Captain Whaley were on Earth. There'd be a foreigner present, while subject to the civil and criminal regulations in that country, are still citizens of their own state. As such, citizens cannot be forced into any kind of contract—marriage is a contract—contrary to their rights in their own nation. Foreign governments having diplomatic relations with other states all subscribe to 'international law'—set of customs which guarantees equal rights in commerce and the security of stating citizens of another state.—Ed.

you are not one of us, you are subject to our laws."

"Well," I said in a clumsy attempt to comfort her, "I guess you do things differently on Mara. Anyway, we'll find some way out of it, Lirio. So—"

"What's the matter?" she asked in sudden anxiety, for my startled expression must have revealed something of the sudden fear that assailed me.

"You—you wouldn't think of getting out of it by—"

"By killing myself?" She smiled sadly. "No. I don't want to kill myself. I want to live. I—oh—"

Without warning she burst into tears, and then began to laugh hysterically. She jumped up and started to run back to the camp, then paused and returned slowly.

"You wouldn't—you wouldn't run away, would you?" She was pleading with me. "Because if you did, they'd—they'd cast me out as a deserted wife!"

THEN she was gone, her slender little figure flashing in and out among the pale green stems of the forest as she ran back toward the camp.

It was a crazy situation, all right. But no crazier than the fact that I was on Mara. I pinched myself hard, winced. No—this was all real enough. I gazed around at the pale yellow-green vegetation, with its strange, unfamiliar forms. Low over the horizon hovered the sun, not half the size it should be to my earthly eyes.

Overhead the strange, grey moons of Mara—moons only a few thousand miles distant and quite visible, though it was broad daylight, hurled themselves across a cloudless sky with a speed that was visibly tremendous. Scarcely a thing on which my eye rested had any aspect of familiarity to me. Yet everything was vividly real.

As to the girl—well, I didn't see what I could do about that. I sighed, and bent my steps slowly back toward the camp of the Ta'u'U.

By the time I got there, the entire clan was drawn up in military array. Lirio, pathetically discouraged, stood with her father several paces in front of the line. When she saw me, she said something to Miora-yu and stepped forward to meet me.

"We have to go through with it, Dusan-tu," she murmured. "Don't hate me too much."

"Don't worry, little one," I whispered. "They may make you my slave, or wife, whichever it is. But they can't make me treat you like a mermaid. You shall always be as free as you are now," and I gave her hand a little squeeze to reassure her.

"Your kindness makes me more your slave than ever," she whispered in reply. "Now come."

She led me before her father. He read some formula rapidly from an inscription on a metal plate—it looked like gold—which he took from a leather case slung over his shoulder. He spoke rapidly, in some other tongue than that used normally by the Ta'u'U, so I could not follow him at all.

Then Lirio bowed her head, and he placed my left

hand on her fair hair. Were there tears in her eyes? I wasn't sure. She kept her head averted from me.

The simple ceremony was over in a few moments. The classmen took it all very solemnly. They gathered in little groups as they walked away, and there were many curious glances thrown over shoulders at us.

Moraya held out his hand to me, and I grasped it, Earth fashion. But I could sense that there was no excess of warmth in him at the idea of Liria's marriage to me, an unknown and mysterious Outlander—for Moraya, of course, did not know my full story. Liria had not dared tell him, nor in all probability would he have believed it.

He looked at me searchingly with troubled eyes. I stammered some promise to him that I would always consider Liria free, but I don't think his mind was on my words. He muttered a perfunctory benediction of some sort. Then he too turned and walked rapidly away, leaving us alone together in the center of the big square.

CHAPTER V

Honeymoon—And Disaster

THERE were no festivities. Nobody seemed to be happy. Certainly Liria and I were not. We had gone through a meaningless formula, one that was acceptable to none of us. Yet there seemed to be nothing that could be done about it.

Liria timidly interrupted my musing. "I shall get our supplies, Damaan-lik—if it pleases you. And—"

"Supplies?" I interrupted. "What for?"

"We must leave the clan for three days," she explained. "Our—our wedding trip, you know."

"But look here, Liria," I objected. "That isn't going to mean a thing to us. I don't see why—We don't actually have to go, do we?"

She nodded her head. "It is the custom. We won't need so very much. I'll be back with our supplies presently."

I stood there frowning. The classmen avoided me. I saw too that they avoided Liria. The newly wedded bride and groom were to be ignored, cast out, avoided for an arbitrary period of three days, it would appear.

Liria returned presently, laden with bags of food and weapons. Uncomfortably I remembered the birch. Strapped to her back was one of those light metal test-frames, and relied and thrown across her shoulder was the test itself. She staggered a bit under the burden. I hastened to her side, but she motioned me away.

"No, no, Damaan-lik!" she said. "It is I who am the slave-maid, not you. It is I who must carry the burden."

"Nonsense!" I began with some heat.

"It is the law," she said simply. "It is I who will suffer if you do not let me obey it."

I glanced quickly around. The classmen were watching us intently. So I had to give it up. I shrugged my shoulders helplessly. Feeling meaner than I had ever felt in my life before, I followed Liria as she staggered through the triangular gate, away from the gleaming walls of the fortresslike edifice, off into the yellow-green forest.

But once beyond sight, a single bound carried me to her side. Headless of her protests, I took all of the burden from her. To my Earth wonder, the load was trifling.

"And now," I laughed, "where do we go from here? And why didn't you bring two tents?"

"Anywhere you say," she rejoined with the nearest thing to a smile since I killed the birch. "And I shall sleep outside, if you want me to."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," I muttered. "I will."

There were low hills a few miles beyond the canal, and we turned our steps in that direction. Liria had regained a bit of her gaiety, but was clearly ill at ease. We chatted in more or less desultory fashion as we went along.

At a point somewhat higher up than that at which I had concealed my little space ship, we prepared to cross the river. I thought with a little pang of my space-raft. Perhaps Liria would like a ride in it. Why—why, I might even take her back to Earth with me!

But, no. It wouldn't be as though we were really in love with each other—had really been married. So I left my thoughts to myself.

We passed presently at the bank of the stream. Of a sudden Liria gave a little shriek of alarm. I looked at her quickly. I had a fleeting impression of her startled glance at something behind me, of a twanging noise from that direction. Something hit me a tremendous blow on the back of the head, and I knew no more.

I DON'T know how long it was before I revived.

The pain in my head was terrific. Only by the most desperate effort of my will did I avoid slipping off into unconsciousness again. Little by little I struggled to my knees and looked around me, fighting the nausea in my stomach.

Liria was gone. So was all our baggage. There were marks in the soil as though of a struggle. I staggered to my feet. My gun was gone from my thigh holster. But I still had the little automatic inside my shirt.

It was not hard to tell what had taken place. An abduction! I had been shot down from behind. Liria had struggled, but had been overcome and carried away. So heavy had been her kidnappers that they had not searched me thoroughly, which was certainly a break from my viewpoint.

It stood to reason, of course, that Liria's abductors had not been members of her own clan. Who, then, were they? Members of a similar class of nomads?

Or man of another race, from north of the barrier?

Well, what to do? After a little of my strength came back, I got into action. My space ship was under the water where I had left it. But the marauders apparently had found it, for one of the hatches—and not that of the airlock—had been opened. The sphere was filled with water. It would have to be dragged ashore and rolled over to be emptied.

For a moment I hesitated whether to return to the encampment and arouse the Ta n'Ur or not. But it would mean further loss of precious time.

So I didn't give that angle a second thought. And a moment later, my helplessness gave way to sudden excitement. For my desperately seeking eyes had caught marks on the bank of the stream—boat marks, as though a water craft of some sort had been run up there. It was easy to see that the stream did not flow much farther in that direction. The presence of these boat marks indicated flight in the opposite direction!

Away I went, upstream along the canal-valley in prodigious leaps of fifteen feet and more.* I was confident that my superiority over the Martians in speed, in strength and in the weapon I still coddled beneath my arm would enable me to overcome great odds, and time was the important element right now.

At length I came to the Gap in the great quartz barrier, where at some far-distant age in the past the stream which had plowed this canal-ear in the face of the planet had cut through. As yet I had caught no glimpse of a water craft.

A faint hail reached me from the glittering rocks above, and a figure stood forth, arm upraised.

I recognized him as one of the Ta n'Ur. I was up the face of the jagged cliff and at his side in a few moments. It was a young man named Ulder, on good duty at the Gap.

A "whonboom," he told me, had gone downstream, had returned. But he had seen no one in it except four Northerners, with a crew of *dolyahs* at the wheels.

"Still," he added, "the forward stack was covered. Many people might have lain bound and gagged beneath that cover.

"It's not part of the Ta n'Ur's duty," he went on, "to interfere with the Northerners themselves in their very rare passages back and forth through the Gap. Our obligation under our treaty with them is simply to prevent migrations of the wild *dolyahs*."

As I dropped back to the canal Gap and leaped away toward the North, I saw Ulder racing madly back toward the encampment to pass on my alarm.

North of the barrier the character of the country changed somewhat. It was wild, but the vegetation was more prolific, and there were evidences here and there of ancient irrigation ditches laid out in regular rows. The canal itself was a shallow valley gouged across the face of a level plain. In its center the stream had cut a deeper and less regular course.

Several miles north of the barrier I came upon the

first evidence of habitation. It was a small structure, but built of that same iridescent material of which the fortress occupied by the Ta n'Ur had been constructed. And like that mysterious edifice, it was a monolith, very old and worn.

I redoubled my efforts and was passing the spot in mid-leap when a figure rose suddenly to contest my way.

It was my first glimpse of a Northerner. In the split second that elapsed before I hit him, my eye photographically engendered a figure in flexible armor of yellow, overlapping metal plates. There was a conical helmet that guarded the nose, ears, and neck as well as the head. Curved plates fitted over the shoulders; armplates closely overlapped at the elbows. Completing the outfit were a skirt or kilt on which more overlapping plates were fastened, and what might be described as metal boots, hinged at the ankles. The fellow, in a panic of frantic haste, was trying to bring one of those long bolt-throwing tubes up at me.

Evidently my great leaps and speed completely upset his judgment of distance. My heavily clad foot came down on the tube, and we went crashing to the ground with a great clanger of metal.

I was on my feet in an instant, but the Martian did not rise. There was a grotesque twist to his head. He had fallen clumsily and his neck was broken.

His armor, I thought, might be useful to me as a disguise, and for an instant I considered appropriating it. But on second thought I decided not to do so. It would be too awkward.

I turned away and was about to leap on up the canal-valley, which was becoming wider now, when I started back in surprise and alarm. Directly in my path was a mounted Martian. But it was the character of his steed that startled me.

It was not a horse at all, but—well, the only thing I could call it in any tongue of Earth would be a "dog." It was as large as a small horse and distinctly canine in appearance and in the intelligence of its eyes, as it stood there, softly poised, watching me as intently as was a rider.

The Martian was clad entirely in soft yellow leather, richly embroidered with sparkling beads. But his garb was not like that of the Ta n'Ur. Instead of a loose sleeveless shirt he wore a sort of collarless, fitted jacket with long sleeves and a mask of scarlet leather. In place of the kilt he wore tight-fitting leggings which covered his limbs entirely.

HE sat well forward on the back of his strange mount, with his toes hooked into peculiar stirrups just back of and under the animal's forelegs. The saddle was in reality a combination saddle and collar, with a metal handle on the top of the latter part. There was no bridle. The rider evidently guided his mount by voiced commands, or possibly by pressure on the collar handle. Though I judged the handle was more to aid him in keeping his seat.

*On Mars, Captain Blomley's weight would be one-third of normal, but the difference in gravity would not affect his muscular strength. Thus on Mars he would be three times as strong as on Earth.—Ed.

CHAPTER VI

Insignificance of Gakko

FOR a moment we confronted each other, and in that brief spell I was conscious of a lifting for the handsome young face before me. In it was nothing of fear, though this Martian knight had no weapon that I could see. But he sat watching me with a steady and alert interest.

Then he raised his arms and held them wide, palms forward, in the Martian gesture of friendship. I glanced usually at the body of the dead gased. He noted it, too.

"It is nothing," he said. "An accident. I saw it all. The fellow exceeded his duty in trying to stop you without first challenging."

He paused a moment. "You are the 'mysterious guest' of the Ta n'Ur that Morrya was telling me about. I have never seen hair as dark as yours. What are you doing here?"

"Are you Morrya's friend?" I asked softly, my hand slipping inside my shirt until it closed over the butt of the little automatic. I thought his eyes narrowed a bit at that. But he showed no alarm.

"I am Morrya's friend," he declared flatly. "It was I who negotiated the treaty for the Ta n'Ur for the Council of Alaria, the Greater Lords of the Polar Cities."

I was quite sure then that this had had had no part in the abduction of Liria, and determined to take a chance on him. After all, I would need help of some sort in rescuing the girl. So I told him how I had been struck down, and of the "wheelboat," as Ulder called it. His astonishment and indignation were obviously genuine.

"And just what were you about to do when we met?" he asked, giving me a curious look.

"Follow that wheelboat and rescue Liria."

He shook his head slowly in negative judgment. "You would not have had a chance," he said. "In the first place, you could not have overruled it. I saw the speed at which you were leaping. I also saw the boat. In the second place, either Gakko, Ahar of Gakko, or one of his Egain—Lester Lords—was in charge of it. Then there were the dalyals at the wheels. They can fight, you know; and when handled by clever commanders, they are terrible adversaries.

"Oh I know of the belt-thrower inside your garment, which your hand now rests on. I heard of that also from the Ta n'Ur. But there were fifty dalyals in that boat, and I don't think you have that many bolts in your weapon."

Discouragement must have shown in my face, for he laughed.

"But it's not so hopeless as all that. A plan is taking shape in my mind. Gakko is no friend of mine, nor of Layard, the Alan-Lux, Supreme Lord of the Cities. This abduction is surely Gakko's work. It is rumored that he has stolen girls from the Southern

clans before, that he has several of them among his wives."

He smiled encouragingly. "Come with me. We must talk this over. We have, I think, a great opportunity to outwit Gakko."

"But what of Liria in the meantime?" I objected.

"She will be all right. Gakko would not dare harm her until he had her safe within his power at home, in Gakko. Besides, he must hasten to attend a council of the Alaria to be held on the Island in two days."

I consented. There didn't seem to be much else for me to do. The young Martian, who informed me his name was Raxur, and that he was one of the Lesser Lords of Borlan, the land adjacent to Gakko on the Polar Sea, made me mount his dog-steed behind him. At his command the animal set off, leaping and scurrying up one of the ancient irrigation ditches away from the canal-valley.

Across a cultivated plain we scurried, between fields of melonlike plants, toward a range of low, verdured hills. It took some skill to cling to the great dog's back, but so fast did he run that it was a matter of minutes only before we had plunged into the vegetation on the slope of the hills. The animal was now scrambling upward to where, in a clearing, stood one of those great iridescent monolithic fortresses such as that occupied by the Ta n'Ur.

In through a triangular gate we flashed, and as the great dog came to a slithering stop, uttering a thunderous bark, a number of dalyals ran forward to take charge of him. It was the first chance I had had of seeing these near-human apes who served the North-western as slaves.

Very manlike they were in build and carriage, and covered from head to foot with yellow fur. But their eyes, so it seemed to me, did not shine with even as great intelligence as those of the dog-steed.

I mentioned this to Raxur.

"They are not as intelligent," he replied. "But they are more dependable, when through several generations of captivity they have been trained to their tasks. But they have their limitations. These fellows, for instance, are of use only in the steed harness. Those over there have been trained to till the fields. They are good for nothing else."

"These"—and he pointed to several who were patrolling the walls, armed with spears—"are good soldiers, although quite incapable of acting on their own initiative. They can comprehend only a single military command at a time."

"I see very few humans," I remarked.

"No," he replied. "There are only a handful here, a few Hillo—that is to say, Freemen—and a dozen or so slaves. You see, this is merely an agricultural outpost. But its supervision comprises part of my duties, and I have to make periodic visits here."

Raxur insisted that I change from my Earth clothes, and put on a Martian suit, which he found for me among his stores. After that we tarried at the post only long enough for refreshments. While we drank

"Bpeak," that investigating hovers the Martians make from one of their varieties of giant reptiles, Ranzar explained to me something of the law which held together the Northern Cities.

SEVEN lands bordered on the Polar Sea, ruled by seven Alarins. One of these, Layard, Alar of Hobb, was by election Alar-Lar, or Supreme Lord of the Council of Albria.

Theoretically the Alarins were at subject to the law as the Epini, or Lesser Lords, and the Idin, or Freemen. But as a matter of fact, they enjoyed absolute power; for accusations could be brought against a Martian of the Polar Cities only by one of equal or superior rank.

There were few of the Alarins who would not welcome the retirement of Gakko from among them, but none who would risk the precipitation of a general war. Gakko, the head ruled over by Gakko, was one of the richest and most powerful of the confederation, with strong natural barriers, a larger population of Idin and slaves than any other land, and by far the greatest force of fighting-trained dalyals.

Likewise, no other Alar was anxious to give Gakko any cause for offense that could be avoided.

"But," Ranzar suggested thoughtfully, "I think that the man with a just complaint against this tyrant, and the courage to slay or strip him of his power, would not be regarded as an enemy. Not, at least, by the Alar-Lar, the Supreme Lord, who fears Gakko's growing influence. Nor the rulers of Berlan, Tuckidon and Ilmo.

"The Alarins of Trifu and Yonodia, the lands beyond Gakko's on the other side of the Sea, are definitely his supporters. But I do not know that even they would necessarily feel injured by his elimination.

"Certainly it would be their best policy to cultivate the favor of the other Alarins, in the event that Gakko were disposed or slain."

Ranzar paused uncomfortably. "Now—or—I don't know whether you would resent being made use of in this way. You see, I am being perfectly frank with you. But you appear to be determined to fight Gakko single-handed anyhow, and—

"Well, I thought it might not be displeasing to you to know that you can count on a certain amount of secret help—since your decision has already been made. Of course, if you fall into Gakko's hands you must realize that no Alar could go very far in giving you protection. The whole situation—or—is rather delicate. I'm sure you can understand our position," he added hastily.

I grew thoughtful at this. I did not like the idea of plunging into the midst of the political turmoil in a world with which I was virtually unfamiliar, of being made a cat's paw by certain of its rulers. I had not hoped all the distance from the remotest of the

To a "U" to become an assassin of Martian kings. I merely wanted to rescue Libria and punish the villains who had abducted her.

"Of course, you are under no obligation to accept any aid at all," Ranzar put in shrewdly. "My only thought was that you want to rescue the girl and—"

"I'll do it!" I said, jumping to my feet.

"Good!" echoed Ranzar enthusiastically. "Come."

CHAPTER VII

I Trail Gakko's Villains

A FEW moments later found me galloping with Ranzar at the head of a band of mounted dalyals. Ranzar had supplied me with a great, powerful brute of a dog to ride. The beast looked understandingly at both of us when Ranzar turned him over to me. Waggling his immense tail, he accepted me from that moment as his master.

Both the dalyals and the dogs on which they were mounted accorded me the same understanding, at a word from Ranzar. The young Martian then drilled me in the words and methods of command necessary for their control.

The most remarkable affection existed between the dalyals and their masters. There seemed to be a perfect understanding of commands and coordination of action. The dogs were more intelligent than the great dalyal apes, but of course lacked much of their physical prowess. Both, Ranzar explained, were terrible in battle, although quite docile to the commands of their master, whenever was the leader selected by the Northerners for a particular task.

To me, it was also comforting to learn that the dalyals were trained to the use of the spear and a short, broad-bladed sword almost like a cleaver, and that they carried these weapons with them.

"We're taking an overland short-cut toward a safe seaport at the boundary of Berlan and Gakko," Ranzar said. "It is there, undoubtedly, that Gakko has taken Libria. For once out on the Sea, she will be in Gakko's waters, and he will have a run down the coast of only some seven hundred miles to Gakko's own city."

"Will we catch them there, do you think?"

"Not we," he said frankly. "Possibly you. But if you can't overtake them before they reach their own territory, I should advise you not to try it, but to journey on leisurely along the coast of the Polar Sea until you arrive at the city of Gakko.

"Establish yourself there as—let me see, now—say, as the son of a rich merchant of Ilmo, for that is the land farthest away from Gakko across the Pole, and you would be less likely to meet suspicion in Gakko."

For the rest of our journey, as our great dogs were along with us at amazing speed and the cavalcade of dalyals raced after us, Ranzar supplied me with much information as to the customs of the Martians.

At length he motioned me to give the order to halt,

* *Palmer*, it would seem, is the name of any planet with an intelligent population. It is not beyond the bounds of reason to suppose that the present crisis now being Earth may not at some time have been duplicated in a remote planet.—Ed.

for the dalyahs and dogs now looked to me only as their master, as Bazar himself had previously commanded them. He pointed toward a silvery stream on the horizon beyond a growth of short ferns.

"It is the Sea," he said. "Your way lies straight ahead. You will see the village after a little bit. Luck be with you, and may you return safe from this daring adventure, for there are many things I would like to discuss with you. Things which I feel I cannot talk over with you at this time. Besides, there has been so much information to give you."

"On what points are you curious?" I asked, having a pretty good idea of what was on his mind from the suspicious glances he had been casting my way.

"Well, for one thing, your coloring is like that of no man I have ever seen," he murmured, and his face grew red. "Indeed, throughout all history, even back through the legendary period of the great Rain of Fire, there is no mention of men with brown hair and deep blue eyes. You appeared suddenly—from nowhere it seemed—among the Ta n'Ur. At least, so Morrya told me.

"Among the Southern Clans, it is considered bad manners to pry into the affairs of strangers and guests." He smiled deprecatingly. "You see, our own customs are somewhat different."

"Does history or legend shed any light on the lands below the equatorial desert?" I asked him.

"None," he admitted. "It is a great subject for speculation among the wise men as to what may be on the Southern half of the globe. We know, of course, that we do live on a globe and not, as it might seem, on a great, flat circular world. But somehow I do not believe you crossed that desert. Neither do the Ta n'Ur."

I laughed. "What do you think, then?" I asked.

"My thought is so wild that I hesitate to take it seriously." He was looking at me keenly. "Have you ever watched the skies at night, and gazed on the Green Planet?"

"Often," I had to admit. "I've often seen it from a distance." Well, considering the many space voyages I'd made, that was true enough!

"Have you ever wondered whether it was a habitable world?"

"No, I never had to wonder about it."

"By Green Planet, Bazar meant of course Earth, did that a boy? Earth would look to the Martians,—Ed.

The look of disappointment on his face was eloquent. He had been shrewd, but he had been frank, too. I could but reply in kind.

After a pause I added: "I know that it is."

"What?" Bazar shouted. "Then you really—"

"Yes. That is where I came from. 'Earth,' we call it."

Bazar acted like one suddenly bereft of his senses. He shouted and laughed, waving his arms madly. Then so quickly he turned and was gone, his great dog racing and bounding across the plain away from me, back in the direction from which we had come.

Amazed and puzzled, I could only gaze helplessly after him. And by the time I thought of calling out to him, he was beyond hearing.

Then came the thought of little Lirin. Well, that was my job, wasn't it? So, with considerable misgivings, I turned toward the distant Polar Sea. I shouted "Hup!" and pointed forward. In an instant, followed by the dalyahs and the dogs, I was bounding along, frequently grabbing at the saddle-handle to steady myself, and uttering the while a silent prayer that at least I had had experience riding horses.

To my earthly eyes the village was indeed strange. I was astonished to find that most of the "buildings" were underground. In this they were quite unlike the only other Martian structures I had seen; the ancient, hideous mounds.

The modern Martians, as I was to learn, dug their cities and villages deep underground, with thick-walled superstructures. Soil and rock were mixed with a red cement, made into large slabs or bricks. The superstructures were little more than entrances and anterooms to the quarters beneath.

Remembering what Bazar had told me—that the "gate," or inn, would be located on the outskirts of the village—I held up my hand. The great dogs behind me slithered to a sudden stop, as did my mount.

I looked around for a shaft of stone or cement bearing a picture or a carving of a dog's head. A metal rod projected from a hole in the ground beside it. This I lifted and let drop again. Somewhere down in the ground there was the sound of a gong, and the metal door in the wall before me was opened.

(CONT. ON PAGE 48)

ON SALE NOW IN OCTOBER AMAZING

THE SUN'S TEARS by BRIAN M. STABLEFORD, STELLA BLUE by GRANT CARRINGTON, DOWNFALL by JEFF JONES, the conclusion of JACK VANCE'S great new novel — THE DOMAINS OF KORYPHON, SPACE THROUGH OUR FINGERS by JACK C. HALDEMAN II, LIKE THE SUN IN SPLENDOR by SANDRA MIESEL, and many new features.

A "JOHNNY MAYHEM"
ADVENTURE

A PLACE IN THE SUN

By C. H. THAMES

Mayhem, the man of many bodies, had been given some weird assignments in his time, but saving The Glory of the Galaxy wasn't difficult—it was downright impossible!

THE SOS crackled and hummed through subspace at a speed which left laggard light far behind. Since subspace distances do not coincide with normal space distances, the SOS was first picked up by a Fomalhautian freighter bound for Capella although it had been issued from a point in normal space midway between the orbit of Mercury and the sun's cornea in the solar system.

The radioman of the Fomalhautian freighter gave the distress signal to the Deck Officer, who looked at it, blinked, and bolted 'bove decks to the captain's cabin. His face



The terrible weapon



blasted death and carnage through the ship.

was very white when he reached the door and his heart pounded with excitement. As the Deck Officer crossed an electronic beam before the door a metallic voice said: "The Captain is asleep and will be disturbed for nothing but emergency priority."

Nodding, the Deck officer stuck his thumb in the whorlock of the door and entered the cabin. "Begging your pardon, sir," he cried, "but we just received an SOS from —"

The Captain stirred groggily, sat up, switched on a green night light and squinted through it at the Deck Officer. "Well, what is it? Isn't the Eye working?"

"Yes, sir. An SOS, sir. . . ."

"If we're close enough to help, subspace or normal space, take the usual steps, Lieutenant. Surely you don't need me to —"

"The usual steps can't be taken, sir. Far as I can make out, that ship is doomed. She's bound on collision course for Sol, only twenty million miles out now."

"That's too bad, Lieutenant," the Captain said with genuine sympathy in his voice. "I'm sorry to hear that. But what do you want me to do about it?"

"The ship, sir. The ship that

sent the SOS—hold on to your hat, sir—"

"Get to the point now, will you, young man?" the Captain growled sleepily.

"The ship which sent the SOS signal, the ship heading on collision course for Sol, is the *Glory of the Galaxy*!"

For a moment the Captain said nothing. Distantly, you could hear the hum of the subspace drive-unit and the faint whining of the stasis generator. Then the Captain bolted out of bed after unstrapping himself. In his haste he forgot the ship was in weightless deep space and went sailing, arms flailing air, across the room. The lieutenant helped him down and into his magnetic-soled shoes.

"My God," the Captain said finally. "Why did it happen? Why did it have to happen to the *Glory of the Galaxy*?"

"What are you going to do, sir?"

"I can't do anything. I won't take the responsibility. Have the radioman contact the Hub at once."

"Yes, sir."

The *Glory of the Galaxy*, the SOS ship heading on collision course with the sun, was making its maiden run from the assembly satellites of Earth across the inner solar system via the perihelion pas-

sage which would bring it within twenty-odd million miles of the sun, to Mars which now was on the opposite side of Sol from Earth. Aboard the gleaming new ship was the President of the Galactic Federation and his entire cabinet.

The Fomalhautian freighter's emergency message was received at the Hub of the Galaxy within moments after it had been sent, although the normal space distance was in the neighborhood of one hundred thousand light years. The message was bounced—in amazingly quick time—from office to office at the hub, cutting through the usual red tape because of its top priority. And—since none of the normal agencies at the Hub could handle it—the message finally arrived at an office which very rarely received official messages of any kind. This was the one unofficial, extra-legal office at the Hub of the Galaxy. Lacking official function, the office had no technical existence and was not to be found in any Directory of the Hub. At the moment, two young men were seated inside. Their sole job was to maintain liason with a man whose very existence was doubted by most of the

human inhabitants of the Galaxy but whose importance could not be measured by mere human standards in those early days when the Galactic League was becoming the Galactic Federation.

The name of the man with whom they maintained contact was Johnny Mayhem.

"Did you read it?" the blond man asked.

"I read it."

"If it got down here, that means they can't handle it anywhere else."

"Of course they can't. What the hell could normal slobs like them or like us do about it?"

"Nothing, I guess. But wait a minute! You don't mean you're going to send Mayhem, without asking him, without telling—"

"We can't ask him now, can we?"

"Johnny Mayhem's *elan* is at the moment speeding from Canopus to Deneb, where on the fourth planet of the Denebian system a dead body is waiting for him in cold storage. The turnover from League to Federation status of the Denebian system is causing trouble in Deneb City, so Mayhem—"

"Deneb City will probably survive without Mayhem. Well, won't it?"

"I guess so, but—"

"I know. The deal is we're supposed to tell Mayhem where he's going and what he can expect. The deal also is, every inhabited world has a body waiting for his elan in cold storage. But don't you think if we could talk to Mayhem now—"

"It isn't possible. He's in transit."

"Don't you think if we could talk to him now he would agree to board the *Glory of the Galaxy*?"

"How should I know? I'm not Johnny Mayhem."

"If he doesn't board her, it's certain death for all of them."

"And if he does board her, what the hell can he do about it? Besides, there isn't any dead body awaiting his elan on that ship or any ship. He wouldn't make a very efficacious ghost."

"But there are live people. Scores of them. Mayhem's elan is quite capable of possessing a living host."

"Sure. Theoretically it is. But damn it all, what would the results be? We've never tried it. It's liable to damage Mayhem. As for the host—"

"The host might die. I know it. But he'll die anyway. The whole shipload of them is heading on collision course for the sun."

"Does the SOS say why?"

"No. Maybe Mayhem can find out and do something about it."

"Yeah, maybe. That's a hell of a way to risk the life of the most important man in the Galaxy. Because if Mayhem boards that ship and can't do anything about it, he'll die with the rest of them."

"Why? We could always pluck his elan out again."

"If he were inhabiting a dead one. In a live body, I don't think so. The attraction would be stronger. There would be forces of cohesion—"

"That's true. Still, Mayhem's our only hope."

"I'll admit it's a job for Mayhem, but he's too important."

"Is he? Don't be a fool. What, actually, is Johnny Mayhem's importance? His importance lies in the very fact that he is expendable. His life—for the furtherance of the new Galactic Federation."

"But—"

"And the President is aboard that ship. Maybe he can't do as much for the Galaxy in the long run as Mayhem can, but don't you see, man, he's a figurehead. Right now he's the most important man in the Galaxy, and if we could talk to him I'm sure

Mayhem would agree. Mayhem would want to board that ship."

"It's funny, we've been working with Mayhem all these years and we never even met the guy."

"Would you know him if you saw him?"

"Umm-mm, I guess not. Do you think we really can halt his clan in subspace and divert it over to the *Glory of the Galaxy*?"

"I take it you're beginning to see things my way. And the answer to your question is yes."

"Poor Mayhem. You know, I actually feel sorry for the guy. He's had more adventures than anyone since Homer wrote the *Odyssey* and there won't ever be any rest for him."

"Stop feeling sorry for him and start hoping he succeeds."

"Yeah."

"And let's see about getting a bead on his clan."

The two young men walked to a tri-dim chart which took up much of the room. One of them touched a button and blue light glowed within the chart, pulsing brightly and sharply where space-sectors intersected.

"He's in C-17 now," one of the men said as a gleaming whiteness was suddenly su-

perimposed at a single point on the blue.

"Can you bead him?"

"I think so. But I still feel sorry for Mayhem. He's expecting to wake up in a cold-storage corpse on Deneb IV but instead he'll come to in a living body aboard a spaceship on collision course for the sun."

"Just hope he—"

"I know. Succeeds. I don't even want to think of the possibility he might fail."

In seconds, the gleaming white dot crawled across the surface of the tri-dim chart from sector C-17 to sector S-1.

The *Glory of the Galaxy* was now nineteen million miles out from the sun and rushing through space at a hundred miles per second, normal space drive. The *Glory of the Galaxy* thus moved a million miles closer to fiery destruction every three hours—but since the sun's gravitational force had to be added to that speed, the ship was slated to plunge into the sun's cornea in little more than twenty-four hours.

Since the ship's refrigeration units would function perfectly until the outer hull reached a temperature of eleven hundred degrees Fahrenheit, none of its passengers

knew that anything was wrong. Even the members of the crew went through all the normal motions. Only the *Glory of the Galaxy's* officers in their bright new uniforms and gold braid knew the grim truth of what awaited the gleaming two-thousand ton spaceship less than twenty-four hours away at the exact center of its perihelion passage.

Something—unidentified as yet—in all the thousands of intricate things that could go wrong on a spaceship, particularly a new one making its maiden voyage, had gone wrong. The officers were checking their catalogues and their various areas of watch meticulously—and not because their own lives were at stake. In spaceflight, your own life always is at stake. There are too many imponderables: you are, to a certain degree, expendable. The commissioned contingent aboard the *Glory of the Galaxy* was a dedicated group, hand-picked from all the officers in the solar system.

But they could find nothing. And do nothing.

Within a day, their lives along with the lives of the enlisted men aboard the *Glory of the Galaxy* and the passengers on its maiden run, would be

snuffed out in a brilliant burst of solar heat.

And the President of the Galactic Federation would die because some unknown factor had locked the controls of the spaceship, making it impossible to turn or use forward rockets against the gravitational pull of the sun.

Nineteen million miles. In normal space, a considerable distance. A hundred miles a second—a very considerable normal space speed. Increasing . . .

Ever since they had left Earth's assembly satellites, Sheila Kelly had seen a lot of a Secret Serviceman named Larry Grange, who was a member of the President's corps of bodyguards. She liked Larry, although there was nothing serious in their relationship. He was handsome and charming and she was naturally flattered with his attentions. Still, although he was older than Sheila, she sensed that he was a boy rather than a man and had the odd feeling that, faced with a real crisis, he would confirm this tragically.

It was night aboard the *Glory of the Galaxy*. Which was to say the blue-green night lights had replaced the white day lights in the com-

panionways and public rooms of the spaceship, since its ports were sealed against the fierce glare of the sun. It was hard to believe, Sheila thought, that they were only nineteen million miles from the sun. Everything was so cool—so comfortably air-conditioned. . . .

She met Larry in the Sunside Lounge, a cabaret as nice as any terran nightclub she had ever seen. There were stylistic Zodiac drawings on the walls and blue-mirrored columns supporting the roof. Like everything else aboard the *Glory of the Galaxy*, the Sunside Lounge hardly seemed to belong on a spaceship. For Sheila Kelly, though—herself a third secretary with the department of Galactic Economy—it was all very thrilling.

"Hello, Larry," she said as the Secret Serviceman joined her at their table. He was a tall young man in his late twenties with crewcut blond hair; but he sat down heavily now and did not offer Sheila his usual smile.

"Why, what on earth is the matter?" Sheila asked him.

"Nothing. I need a drink, that's all."

The drinks came. Larry gulped his and ordered another. His complete silence

baffled Sheila, who finally said:

"Surely it isn't anything I did."

"You? Don't be silly."

"Well! After the way you said that I don't know if I should be glad or not."

"Just forget it. I'm sorry, kid, I—" He reached out and touched her hand. His own hand was damp and cold.

"Going to tell me, Larry?"

"Listen. What's a guy supposed to do if he overhears something he's not supposed to overhear, and—"

"How should I know unless you tell me what you overheard? It is you you're talking about, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I was going off duty, walking by officer quarters and . . . oh, forget it. I better not tell you."

"I'm a good listener, Larry."

"Look, Irish. You're a good anything — and that's the truth. You have looks and you have brains and I have a hunch through all that Emerald Isle sauciness you have a heart too. But—"

"But you don't want to tell me."

"It isn't I don't want to, but no one's supposed to know, not even the President."

"You sure make it sound mysterious."

"Just the officera. Oh, hell. I don't know. What good would it do if I told you?"

"I guess you'd just get it off your chest, that's all."

"I can't tell anyone official, Sheila. I'd have my head handed to me. But I've got to think and I've got to tell someone. I'll go crazy, just knowing and not doing anything."

"It's important, isn't it?"

Larry downed another drink quickly. It was his fourth and Sheila had never seen him take more than three or four in the course of a whole evening. "You're damned right it's important." Larry leaned forward across the postage-stamp table. A liquor-haze clouded his eyes as he said: "It's so important that unless someone does something about it, we'll all be dead inside of twenty-four hours. Only trouble is, there isn't anything anyone can do about it."

"Larry — you're a little drunk."

"I know it. I know I am. I want to be a lot drunker. What the hell can a guy do?"

"What do you know, Larry? What have you heard?"

"I know they have the President of the Galactic Federation aboard this ship and that he ought to be told the truth."

"No. I mean—"

"They sent out an SOS, kid. Controls are locked. Lifeboats don't have enough power to get us out of the sun's gravitational pull. We're all going to roast, I tell you!"

Sheila felt her heart throb wildly. Even though he was well on the way to being thoroughly drunk, Larry was telling the truth. Instinctively, she knew that—was certain of it. "What are you going to do?" she said.

He shrugged. "I guess because I can't do a damned thing I'm going to get good and drunk. That's what I'm going to do. Or maybe—who the hell knows?—maybe in one minute I'm going to jump up on this table and tell everyone what I overheard. Maybe I ought to do that, huh?"

"Larry, Larry—if it's as bad as you say, maybe you ought to think before you do anything."

"Who am I to think? I'm one of the muscle men. That's what they pay me for, isn't it?"

"Larry. You don't have to shout."

"Well, isn't it?"

"If you don't calm down I'll have to leave."

"You can sit still. You can park here all night. I'm leaving."

"What are you going to do?"

"Oh . . . that." Larry got up from the table. He looked suddenly green and Sheila thought it was because he had too much to drink. "You don't have to worry about that, Sheila. Not now you don't. I all of a sudden don't feel so good. Headache. Man, I never felt anything like it. Better go to my cabin and lie down. Maybe I'll wake up and find out all this was a dream, huh?"

"Do you need any help?" Sheila demanded, real concern in her voice.

"No. 'Sall right. Man, this headache really snuck up on me. Pow! Without any warning."

"Let me help you."

"No. Just leave me alone, will you?" Larry staggered off across the crowded dance floor. He drew angry glances and muttered comments as he disturbed the dancers waltzing to Carlotti's *Danube in Space*.

Why don't you admit it, Grange, Larry thought as he staggered through the companionway toward his cabin. That's what you always wanted, isn't it—a place of importance?

A place in the sun, they call it.

"You're going to get a place in the sun, all right," he mumbled aloud. "Right smack in the middle of the sun with everyone else aboard this ship!"

The humor of it amused him perversely. He smiled—but it was closer to a leer—and lunged into his cabin. What he said to Sheila was no joke. He really did have a splitting headache. It had come on suddenly and it was like no headache he had ever known. It pulsed and throbbed and beat against his temples and held red hot needles to the backs of his eyeballs, almost blinding him. It sapped all his strength, leaving him physically weak. He was barely able to close the door behind him and stagger to the shower.

An ice cold shower, he thought would help. He stripped quickly and got under the needle spray. By that time he was so weak he could barely stand.

A place in the sun, he thought . . .

Something grabbed his mind and wrenched it.

Johnny Mayhem awoke.

Awakening came slowly, as it always did. It was a rising through infinite gulfs, a rebirth for a man who had died a hundred times and might die

a thousand times more as the years piled up and became centuries. It was a spinning, whirling, flashing ascent from blackness to coruscating colors, brightness, giddiness.

And suddenly, it was over.

A needle spray of ice-cold water beat down upon him. He shuddered and reached for the water-taps, shutting them. Dripping, he climbed from the shower.

And floated up — quite weightless—toward the ceiling.

Frowning with his new and as yet unseen face, Johnny Mayhem propelled himself to the floor. He looked at his arms. He was naked—at least that much was right.

But obviously, since he was weightless, he was not on Deneb IV. During his transmigration he had been briefed for the trouble on Deneb IV. Then had a mistake been made somehow? It was always possible—but it had never happened before.

Too much precision and careful planning was involved.

Every world which had an Earthman population and a Galactic League—now, Galactic Federation — post, must have a body in cold storage, waiting for Johnny Mayhem if his services were required. No one knew when Mayhem's

services might be required. No one knew exactly under what circumstances the Galactic Federation Council, operating from the Hub of the Galaxy, might summon Mayhem. And only a very few people, including those at the Hub and the Galactic League Firstmen on civilized worlds and Observers on frontier planets, knew the precise mechanics of Mayhem's coming.

Johnny Mayhem, a bodiless sentience. Mayhem — Johnny Marlow then—who had been chased from Earth a pariah and a criminal seven years ago, who had been mortally wounded on a wild planet deep within the Sagittarian Swarm, whose life had been saved—after a fashion—by the white magic of that planet. Mayhem, doomed now to possible immortality as a bodiless sentience, an *elan*, which could occupy and activate a corpse if it had been preserved properly . . . an *elan* doomed to wander eternally because it could not remain in one body for more than a month without body and *elan* perishing. Mayhem, who had dedicated his strange, lonely life to the services of the Galactic League—now the Galactic Federation — because a normal life and normal social

relations were not possible to him . . .

It did not seem possible, Mayhem thought now, that a mistake could be made. Then—a sudden change in plans?

It had never happened before, but it was entirely possible. Something, Mayhem decided, had come up during transmigration. It was terribly important and the people at the Hub had had no opportunity to brief him on it.

But—what?

His first shock came a moment later. He walked to a mirror on the wall and approved of the strong young body which would house his sentience and then scowled. A thought inside his head said:

So this is what it's like to have schizophrenia.

What the hell was that? Mayhem thought.

I said, so this is what it's like to have schizophrenia. First the world's worst headache and then I start thinking like two different people.

Aren't you dead?

Is that supposed to be a joke, alter ego? When do the men in the white suits come?

Good Lord, this was supposed to be a dead body!

At that, the other sentience which shared the body with Mayhem snickered and lapsed

into silence. Mayhem, for his part, was astounded.

Don't get ornery now, Mayhem pleaded, I'm Johnny Mayhem. Does that mean anything to you?

Oh, sure. It means I'm dead. You inhabit dead bodies, right?

Usually. Listen—where are we?

Glory of the Galaxy—bound from Earth to Mars on perihelion.

And there's trouble?

How do you know there's trouble?

Otherwise they wouldn't have diverted me here.

We've got the president aboard. We're going to hit the sun. Then, grudgingly, Larry went into the details. When he finished he thought cynically: Now all you have to do is go outside yelling have no fear, Mayhem is here and everything will be all right, I suppose.

Mayhem didn't answer. It would be many moments yet before he could adjust to this new, unexpected situation. But in a way, he thought, it would be a boon. If he were co-inhabiting the body of a living man who belonged on the *Glory of the Galaxy*, there was no need to reveal his identity as Johnny Mayhem to anyone but his host . . .

"I tell ya," Technician First Class Ackerman Boone shouted. "the refrigeration unit's gone on the blink. You can't feel it yet, but I ought to know. I got the refrigs working full strength and we gained a couple of degrees heat. Either she's on the blink or we're too close to the sun, I tell you!"

Ackerman Boone was a big man, a veteran spacer with a squat, very strong body and arms like an orangutan. Under normal circumstances he was a very fine spacer and a good addition to any crew, but he bore an unreasonable grudge against the officer corps and would go out of his way to make them look bad in the eyes of the other enlisted men. A large crowd had gathered in the hammock-hung crew quarters of the *Glory of the Galaxy* as Boone went on in his deep, booming voice: "So I asked the skipper of the watch, I did. He got shifty-eyed, like they always do. You know. He wasn't talking, but sure as my name's Ackerman Boone, something's wrong."

"What do you think it is, Acky?" one of the younger men asked.

"Well, I tell ya this: I know what it isn't. I checked out the refrigs three times, see, and came up with nothing. The re-

frigs are in jig order, and if I know it then you know it. So, if the refrigs are in jig order, there's only one thing it can be: we're getting too near the sun!" Boone clamped his mouth shut and stood with thick, muscular arms crossed over his barrel chest.

A young technician third class said in a strident voice, "You mean you think maybe we're plunging into the sun, Acky?"

"Well, now, I didn't say that. Did I, boy? But we are too close and if we are too close there's got to be a reason for it. If we stay too close too long, O.K. Then we're plunging into the sun. Right now, I dunno."

They all asked Ackerman Boone, who was an unofficial leader among them, what he was going to do. He rubbed his big fingers against the thick stubble of beard on his jaw and you could hear the rasping sound it made. Then he said, "Nothing, until we find out for sure. But I got a hunch the officers are trying to pull the wool over the eyes of them politicians we got on board. That's all right with me, men. If they want to, they got their reasons. But I tell ya this: they ain't going to pull any wool over Acky

Boone's eyes, and that's a fact."

Just then the squawk box called: "Now hear this! Now hear this! Tech/1 Ackerman Boone to Exec's office, Tech/1 Boone to Exec."

"You see?" Boone said, smiling grimly. As yet, no one saw. His face still set in a grim smile, Ackerman Boone headed above decks.

"That, Mr. President," Vice Admiral T. Shawnley Stapleton said gravely, "is the problem. We would have come to you sooner, sir, but frankly—"

"I know it, Admiral," the President said quietly. "I could not have helped you in any way. There was no sense telling me."

"We have one chance, sir, and one only. It's irregular and it will probably knock the hell out of the *Glory of the Galaxy*, but it may save our lives. If we throw the ship suddenly into subspace we could pass right through the sun's position and—"

"I'm no scientist, Admiral, but wouldn't that put tremendous stress not only on the ship but on all of us aboard?"

"It would, sir. I won't keep anything from you, of course. We'd all be subjected to a force of twenty-some gravities

for a period of several seconds. Here aboard the *Glory*, we don't have adequate G-equipment. It's something like the old days of air flight, sir: as soon as airplanes became reasonably safe, passenger ships didn't bother to carry parachutes. Result over a period of fifty years: thousands of lives lost. We'd all be bruised and battered, sir. Bones would be broken. There might be a few deaths. But I see no other way out, sir."

"Then there was no need to check with me at all, I assure you, Admiral Stapleton. Do whatever you think is best, sir."

The Admiral nodded gravely. "Thank you, Mr. President. I will say this, though: we will wait for a miracle."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Well, I don't expect a miracle, but the switchover to subspace so suddenly is bound to be dangerous. Therefore, we'll wait until the last possible moment. It will grow uncomfortably warm, let me warn you, but as long as the subspace drive is in good working order—"

"I see what you mean, Admiral. You have a free hand, sir; let me repeat that. I will not interfere in any way and I have the utmost confidence

in you." The President mopped his brow with an already damp handkerchief. It was growing warm, come to think of it. Uncomfortably warm.

As if everyone aboard the *Glory of the Galaxy* was slowly being broiled alive. . . .

Ackerman Boone entered the crew quarters with the same smile still on his lips. At first he said nothing, but his silence drew the men like a magnet draws iron filings. When they had all clustered about him he spoke.

"The Exec not only chewed my ears off," he boomed. "He all but spit them in my face! I was right, men. He admitted it to me after he saw how he couldn't get away with anything in front of Ackerman Boone. Men, we're heading on collision course with the sun!"

A shocked silence greeted his words and Ackerman Boone, instinctively a born speaker, paused dramatically to allow each man the private horror of his own thoughts for a few moments. Then he continued: "The Admiral figures we have one chance to get out of this alive, men. He figures—"

"What is it, Acky?"

"What will he do?"

"How will the Admiral get us out of this?"

Ackerman Boone spat on the polished, gleaming floor of the crew quarters. "He'll never get us out alive. let me tell you. He wants to shift us into subspace at the last possible minute. Suddenly. Like this—" and Ackerman Boone snapped his fingers.

"There'd be a ship full of broken bones!" someone protested. "We can't do a thing like that."

"He'll kill us all!" a very young T/3 cried hysterically.

"Not if I can help it, he won't," shouted Ackerman Boone. "Listen, men. This ain't a question of discipline. It's a question of living or dying and I tell you that's more important than doing it like the book says or discipline or anything like that. We got a chance, all right: but it ain't what the Admiral thinks it is. We ought to abandon the *Glory* to her place in the sun and scam out of here in the lifeboats—every last person aboard ship."

"But will they have enough power to get out of the sun's gravitational pull?" someone asked.

Ackerman Boone shrugged. "Don't look at me," he said mockingly. "I'm only an enlisted man and they don't give enlisted men enough math to answer questions like that.

But reckoning by the seat of my pants I would say, yes. Yes, we could get away like that—if we act fast. Because every minute we waste is a minute that brings us closer to the sun and makes it harder to get away in the lifeboats. If we act, men, we got to act fast."

"You're talking mutiny, Boone," a grizzled old space veteran said. "You can count me out."

"What's the matter, McCormick? Yellow?"

"I'm not yellow. I say it takes guts to maintain discipline in a real emergency. I say you're yellow, Boone."

"You better be ready to back that up with your fists, McCormick," Boone said savagely.

"I'm ready any time you're ready, you yellow mutinous bastard!"

Ackerman Boone launched himself at the smaller, older man, who stood his ground unflinchingly although he probably knew he would take a sound beating. But four or five crewmen came between them and held them apart, one saying:

"Look who's talking, Boone. You say time's precious but you're all set to start fighting. Every minute—"

"Every second," Boone said grimly, "brings us more than a hundred miles closer to the sun."

"What can we do, Acky?"

Instead of answer, Ackerman Boone dramatically mopped the sweat from his face. All the men were uncomfortably warm now. It was obvious that the temperature within the *Glory of the Galaxy* had now climbed fifteen or twenty degrees despite the fact that the refrigs were working at full capacity. Even the bulkheads and the metal floor of crew quarters were unpleasantly warm to the touch. The air was hot and suddenly very dry.

"I'll tell you what we ought to do," Ackerman Boone said finally. "Admiral Stapleton or no Admiral Stapleton, President of the Galactic Federation or no President of the Galactic Federation, we ought to take over this ship and man the life boats for everyone's good. If they don't want to save their lives and ours—let's us save our lives and theirs!"

Roars of approval greeted Boone's words, but Spacer McCormick and some of the other veterans stood apart from the loud speech-making which followed. Actually, Boone's wild words—which he gambled with after the first

flush of enthusiasm for his plan—began to lose converts. One by one the men drifted toward McCormick's silent group until, finally, Boone had lost almost his entire audience.

Just then a T/2 rushed into crew quarters and shouted: "Hey, is Boone around? Has anyone seen Boone?"

This brought general laughter. Under the circumstances, the question was not without its humorous aspect.

"What'll you have?" Boone demanded.

"The refrigs, Boone! They are on the blink. Overstrained themselves and burned themselves out. Inside of half an hour this ship's going to be an oven hot enough to kill us all!"

"Half an hour, men!" Ackerman Boone cried. "Now, do we take over the ship and man those lifeboats or don't we?"

The roar which followed his words was a decidedly affirmative one.

"These are the figures," Admiral Stapleton said. "You can see, Mr. President, that we have absolutely no chance whatever if we man the lifeboats. We would perish as assuredly as we would if we remained with the *Glory of the Galaxy* in normal space."

"Admiral, I have to hand it

to you. I don't know how you can think—in all this heat."

"Have to, sir. Otherwise we all die."

"The air temperature—"

"Is a hundred and thirty degrees and rising. We've passed salt tablets out to everyone, sir, but even then it's only a matter of time before we're all prostrated. If you're sure you give your permission, sir—"

"Admiral Stapleton, you are running this ship, not I."

"Very well, sir. I've sent our subspace officer, Lieutenant Ormudy, to throw in the subspace drive. We should know in a few moments—"

"No crash hammocks or anything?"

"I'm sorry, sir."

"It isn't your fault, Admiral. I was merely pointing out a fact."

The squack box blared: "Now hear this! Now hear this! T/3 Ackerman Boone to Admiral Stapleton. Are you listening, Admiral?"

Admiral Stapleton's haggard, heat-worn face bore a look of astonishment as he listened. Ackerman said, "We have Lieutenant Ormudy, Admiral. He's not killing us all by putting us into subspace in minutes when it ought to take hours, you understand. We have Ormudy and we

have the subspace room. A contingent of our men is getting the lifeboats ready. We're going to abandon ship, Admiral, all of us, including you and the politicians even if we have to drag you aboard the lifeboats at N—gunpoint."

Admiral Stapleton's face went ashen. "Let me at a radio!" he roared. "I want to answer that man and see if he understands exactly what mutiny is!"

While Ackerman Boone was talking over the squawk box, the temperature within the *Glory of the Galaxy* rose to 145° Fahrenheit.

"Fifteen minutes," Larry Grange said. "In fifteen minutes the heat will have us all unconscious." Only it wasn't Larry alone who was talking. It was Larry and Johnny Mayhem. In a surprisingly short time the young Secret Serviceman had come to accept the dual occupation of his own mind. It was there: it was either dual occupation or insanity and if the voice which spoke inside his head said it was Johnny Mayhem, then it was Johnny Mayhem. Besides, Larry felt clear-headed in a way he had never felt before, despite the terrible, sapping heat. It was as if he had matured suddenly—

the word matured came to him instinctively—in the space of minutes. Or, as if a maturing influence were at work on his mind.

"What can we do?" Sheila said. "The crew has complete control of the ship."

"Secret Service chief says we're on our own. There's no time for co-ordinated planning, but somehow, within a very few minutes, we've got to get inside the subspace room and throw the ship out of normal space or we'll all be roasted."

"Some of your men are there now, aren't they?"

"In the companionway outside the subspace room, yeah. But they'll never force their way in time. Not with blasters and not with N-guns, either. Not in ten minutes, they won't."

"Larry, all of a sudden I—I'm scared. We're all going to die, Larry. I don't want—Larry, what are you going to do?"

They had been walking in a deserted companionway which brought them to one of the aft escape hatches of the *Glory of the Galaxy*. Their clothing was plastered to their bodies with sweat and every breath was agonizing, furnace hot.

"I'm going outside," Larry said quietly.

"Outside? What do you mean?"

"Spacesuit, outside. There's a hatch in the subspace room. If their attention is diverted to the companionway door, I may be able to get in. It's our only chance—ours, and everyone's."

"But the spacesuit—"

"I know," Larry said even as he was climbing into the inflatable vacuum garment. It was Larry—and it wasn't Larry. He felt a certain confidence, a certain sense of doing the right thing—a feeling which Larry Grange had never experienced before in his life. It was as if the boy had become a man in the final moments of his life—or, he thought all at once, it was as if Johnny Mayhem who shared his mind and his body with him was somehow transmitting some of his own skills and confidence even as he—Mayhem—had reached the decision to go outside.

"I know," he said. "The spacesuit isn't insulated sufficiently. I'll have about three minutes out there. Three minutes to get inside. Otherwise, I'm finished."

"But Larry—"

"Don't you see, Sheila? What does it matter? Who wants the five or ten extra minutes if we're all going to

die anyway? This way, there's a chance."

He buckled the spacesuit and lifted the heavy fishbowl helmet, preparing to set it on his shoulders.

"Wait," Sheila said, and stood on tiptoes to take his face in her hands and kiss him on the lips. "You—you're different," Sheila said. "You're the same guy, a lot of fun, but you're a—man, too. This is for what might have been, Larry," she said, and kissed him again. "This is because I love you."

Before he dropped the helmet in place, Larry said. "It isn't for what might have been, Sheila. It's for what will be."

The helmet snapped shut over the shoulder ridges of the spacesuit. Moments later, he had slipped into the airlock.

"I say you're a fool, Ackerman Boone!" one of the enlisted men rasped at the leader of the mutiny. "I say now we've lost our last chance. Now it's too late to get into the lifeboats even if we wanted to. Now all we can do is—die!"

There were still ten conscious men in the subspace room. The others had fallen before heat prostration and lay strewn about the floor,



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wringing wet and oddly flaccid as if all the moisture had been wrung from their bodies except for the sweat which covered their skins.

"All right," Ackerman Boone admitted. "All right, so none of us knows how to work the subspace mechanism. You think that would have helped? It would have killed us all, I tell you."

"It was a chance, Boone. Our last chance and you—"

"Just shut up!" Boone snarled. "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking we ought to let them officers and Secret Servicemen to ram home the subspace drive. But use your head, man. Probably they'll kill us all, but if they don't—"

"Then you admit there's a chance!"

"Yeah. All right, a chance. But if they don't kill us all, if they save us by ramming home the subspacer, what happens? We're all taken in on a mutiny charge. It's a capital offense, you fool!"

"Well, it's better than sure death," the man said, and moved toward the door.

"Allister, wait!" Boone cried. "Wait, I'm warning you. Any man who tries to open that door—"

Outside, a steady booming of blaster fire could be heard,

but the assault-proof door stood fast.

"—is going to get himself killed!" Boone finished.

Grimly, Allister reached the door and got his already blistered fingers on the lock mechanism.

Ackerman Boone shot him in the back with an N-gun.

Larry's whole body felt like one raw mass of broken blisters as, flat on his belly, he inched his way along the outside hull of the *Glory of the Galaxy*. He had no idea what the heat was out here, but it radiated off the hot hull of the *Glory* in scalding, suffocating waves which swept right through the insulining of the spacesuit. If he didn't find the proper hatch, and in a matter of seconds . . .

"Anyone else?" Ackerman Boone screamed. "Anyone else like Allister?"

But one by one the remaining men were dropping from the heat. Finally—alone—Ackerman Boone faced the door and stared defiantly at the hot metal as if he could see his adversaries through it. On the other side, the firing became more sporadic as the officers and Secret Servicemen collapsed. His mind crazed with the heat and with fear,

Ackerman Boone suddenly wished he could see the men through the door, wished he could see them die . . .

It was this hatch or nothing. He thought it was the right one, but couldn't be sure. He could no longer see. His vision had gone completely. The pain was a numb thing now, far away, hardly a part of himself. Maybe Mayhem was absorbing the pain-sensation for him, he thought. Maybe Mayhem took the pain and suffered with it in the shared body so he, Larry, could still think. Maybe—

His blistered fingers were barely able to move within the insulated gloves, Larry fumbled with the hatch.

Ackerman Boone whirled suddenly. He had been intent upon the companionway door and the sounds behind him—which he had heard but not registered as dangerous for several seconds—now made him turn.

The man was peeling off a space suit. Literally peeling it off in strips from his lobster-red flesh. He blinked at Boone without seeing him. Dazzle-blinded, Boone thought, then realized his own vision was going.

"I'll kill you if you go near

that subspace drive!" Boone screamed.

"It's the only chance for all of us and you know it, Boone," the man said quietly. "Don't try to stop me."

Ackerman Boone lifted his N-gun and squinted through the haze of heat and blinding light. He couldn't see! He couldn't see . . .

Wildly, he fired the N-gun. Wildly, in all directions, spraying the room with it—

Larry dropped blindly forward. Twice he tripped over unconscious men, but climbed to his feet and went on. He could not see Boone, but he could see—vaguely—the muzzle flash of Boone's N-gun. He staggered across the room toward that muzzle-flash and finally embraced it—

And found himself fighting for his life. Boone was crazed now—with the heat and with his own failure. He bit and tore at Larry with strong claw-like fingers and lashed out with his feet. He balled his fists and hammered air like a windmill, arms flailing, striking flesh often enough to batter Larry toward the floor.

Grimly Larry clung to him, pulled himself upright, ducked his head against his chest and struck out with his own fists, feeling nothing, not knowing when they landed and when

they did not, hearing nothing but a far off roaring in his ears, a roaring which told him he was losing consciousness and had to act—soon—if he was going to save anyone . . .

He stood and pounded with his fists.

Pounded—air.

He did not know that Boone had collapsed until his feet trod on the man's inert body and then, quickly, he rushed toward the control board, rushed blindly in its direction, or in the direction he thought it would be, tripped over something, sprawled on the hot, blistering floor, got himself up somehow, crawled forward, pulled himself upright . . .

There was no sensation in his fingers. He did not know if he had actually reached the control board but abruptly he realized that he had not felt Mayhem's presence in his mind for several minutes. Was Mayhem conserving his energy for a final try, letting Larry absorb the punishment now so he—

Yes, Larry remembered thinking vaguely. It had to be that. For Mayhem knew how to work the controls, and he did not. Now his mind receded into a fog of semi-consciousness, but he was aware that his blistered fingers were fair-

ly flying across the control board, aware then of an inward sigh—whether of relief or triumph, he was never to know—then aware, abruptly and terribly, of a wrenching pain which seemed to strip his skin from his flesh, his flesh from his bones, the marrow from . . .

"Can you see?" the doctor asked.

"Yes," Larry said as the bandages were removed from his eyes. Three people were in the room with the doctor—Admiral Stapleton, the President—and Sheila. Somehow, Sheila was most important.

"We are now in subspace, thanks to you," the Admiral said. "We all have minor injuries as a result of the transfer, but there were only two fatalities, I'm happy to say. And naturally, the ship is now out of danger."

"What gets me, Grange," the President said, "is how you managed to work those controls. What the devil do you know about sub-space, my boy?"

"The two fatalities," the Admiral said, "were Ackerman Boone and the man he had killed." Then the Admiral grinned. "Can't you see, Mr. President, that he's not paying any attention to us? I think,

-(cont. on page 126)

CALLING CAPTAIN FLINT

By RICHARD GREER

An alien life form with all the arts of makeup and camouflage at its command, is required to walk among human beings and not be suspected. A tough problem. What manner of impersonation should the alien attempt? Why, the obvious one, of course.

IN THE communications room of the Interstellar Police Cruiser *Skyfire*, a thin sheet of pale green plastic slid out of the lightwriter. Lieutenant Summers waited until the message was finished, then ripped the sheet out of the reproducer.

He raised an eyebrow as he read the communication. "Trouble on Delgon III, eh?" he muttered to himself. "Looks like a rough time will be had by all." He reached over and punched a button on the intercom panel. "Captain Flint? Orders from Main Base just came in."

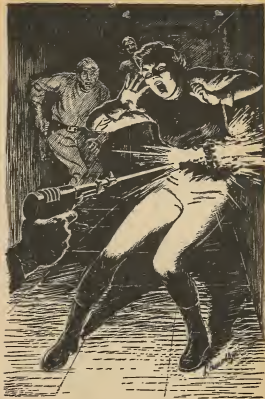
"Send them up," said the voice at the other end.

Summers dropped the sheet of plastic into a slot marked "Captain's Quarters," and it vanished. Less than a minute

later, orders were crackling over the communication lines in the great vessel. The *Skyfire* had been merely cruising along on a routine flight through the vast, starry reaches of the Galaxy, but now it changed its direction of flight, and the mighty super-atomic engines of the great battle cruiser hurled it through space at the highest velocity they could obtain.

Light-year after light-year of space were eaten up as the ship drove toward a star called Delgon—or, more precisely, toward the third planet of that sun, Delgon III.

At a broad table somewhere in the fortress-capitol of the world of Delgon III, sat a man. There were other men around him, but to even the



The ray seared through flesh and bone.

most casual observer, there was something so different about this one man that he overshadowed the others as a skyscraper overshadows a puppet. He had a hard, broad jaw, iron-gray hair, and a heavy, muscular body. He smiled coldly at the others, and behind his jet-black eyes there glittered something malignantly evil.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the so-called 'underground' tried to send a message from here to the Interstellar Police. We don't know whether or not it got through, but we must take no chances. Have you any suggestions?" He looked around the room, finally allowing his eyes directly to come to rest on one man. "Admiral Gorfos?"

"Our defenses are more than adequate for any Police ship, sir," he said. His voice was almost sneering. "Their puny armaments are not now, nor will they ever be, a match for ours."

"You, Admiral, are a fool," said the other. "At this point in the game, overconfidence is our greatest enemy. As long as the Interstellar Police know nothing of our operations, we are relatively safe. But if—and when—that call is answered, we must be prepared to wipe out that ship before a

call for help can be sent to their Main Base."

"Sir, no single ship could outmaneuver our defenses," the Admiral said stubbornly. "We have detector screens in multiple layers, covering every volume of space for three light years away. We have a screen of a thousand battleships covering that volume of space. No object bigger than a basketball could approach us without being discovered, and, once discovered, it will be annihilated."

"I hope, for your own sake, you are right," the leader said. His cold eyes moved a bit, to the next man. "Derwyn, you were supposed to have stamped all opposition out, yet there remained enough of a nucleus to enable them to build and operate a sub-space radio and call the Interstellar Police. What have you to say?"

Derwyn's face was white, but his voice was even. "As soon as the radio began to operate, my men smashed into their hideout, destroyed the radio, and captured those rebels who were not killed outright. We were there within fifteen seconds after the instrument was turned on."

"There was time for them to make the call," said the leader. "And your job was to

prevent such things, not to stop them after it's too late."

"Perhaps the call didn't get through," Derwyn said.

"So? Another's failure does not atone for your own." He had been holding one hand beneath the edge of the table. Now he lifted it, and it came up holding a Kedwin 50 blaster. His finger touched the activator, and the subordinate crumpled to the floor as the ravaging energy beam tore through his head.

"Remove it," the leader signalled. "Baltek, I trust you can do a better job with the Secret Police than your former superior."

As the guards dragged away the body, the man addressed as Baltek nodded. "I have already taken steps to nail down those rebels who are left," he said, glancing once at his dead superior with callous indifference.

"Excellent," said the leader. "Then let us proceed. There are other things to attend to."

He looked at all of them, one by one. "We must deal, somehow, with Jaim Umek, the former President. He is still alive, and he has sworn to kill himself if he's ever captured. We must decide on a way to capture him alive; in his mind are certain valuable

secrets that we must have. Are there any suggestions?"

Baltek smiled craftily. "I think I may have one, sir."

Six months later, an old man sat in his apartment, looking at the three people that were seated in various chairs around the room. He sighed, and felt, somehow, very old indeed. Jaim Umek, at seventy, did not feel at all like leading a subtle revolt that might at any time break into violence.

He surveyed the others carefully. Smed Hober, a barrel-chested, heavy-bearded, heavy-set man, whose rough manner concealed an intelligent brain; Bety Cardill, a girl in her middle twenties, with closely-cropped red hair and wide-set green eyes; and Jay Denner, tall, blond, handsome, and much too young. He didn't look a day over eighteen.

A girl, a boy, and an old man. Only Smed Hober was really the type for this kind of work. But, Jaim Umek thought to himself, it was work that had to be done—by whoever was available to do it.

"It has been six months," he said, in his soft, old voice. "Six months since we contacted the Police. And nothing has come of it. None of you were with

me at that time; the original group was wiped out—except for myself. I am small, and I was able to hide. But the others were killed, some right on the spot, others later, in prison.

"Since then, my men have been killed, one by one, here and there, until there are only the four of us left. And still the Police do not come."

Smed Hober snorted, and his deep voice came rumbling out of his chest. "How the hell do you know you even contacted them?"

Umek smiled faintly. "I may as well tell you. We got an answer from the Main Base of the Interstellar Police. They said they were sending one ship: the *Skyfire*, commanded by Captain Jason Flint."

Bety Cardill's green eyes narrowed. "One ship? How did they ever expect to get through the defenses around this planet? Admiral Gorgos has enough power out there to smash any single ship."

"True, my dear," said Umek sadly. "You see, the Police had no notion that this was as important as it is. They didn't know how closely guarded and viciously defended Delgon III is. The *Skyfire* was probably blasted out of space months ago."

Jay Denner ran a muscular hand over his blond hair. "Then we can't expect help from that quarter. What do we do? Give up?"

Jaim Umek's gray eyes looked steadily into Denner's blue ones. "Give up? No! No, young man, we most emphatically do not! Leader Mordegg and his crew of cut-throats are planning the biggest interstellar war this Galaxy has ever seen. If it is not nipped in the bud now, millions—nay, billions—of innocent people will die.

"No, we must not give up; we must somehow get word to the Interstellar Police again. And this time, we must tell them to send a fleet, not just a single cruiser."

"How do you propose to do that, Umek?" Hober said, in a deep bass voice. "It takes expensive equipment to build a subspace radio, and Leader Mordegg has seen to it that all sources of supply have been cut off. Frankly, I don't think we can build another radio, and, even if we did, we'd be spotted before we could get a message out. This new Secret Police Chief, Baltek, is no fool; he's been wiping out our men wholesale these last six months."

"True," nodded Jaim Umek slowly. "If it were not for the

spy ray block around this room he would probably even now be watching us. Except for us four, Mordegg and Baltek control the whole planet.

"But, nonetheless, I have a plan."

"Let's hear it," said Bety.

Umek shook his head. "Not now. We must proceed slowly. You see, I happen to have one bit of vital information that Mordegg does not have. I have reason to believe that Captain Jason Flint, alone of all his crew, survived the wrecking of the *Skyfire* and is, at this moment, somewhere in Delgon City!"

Leader Mordegg pressed a switch on the visiphone at his desk, and the screen lit up to reveal the features of a hard-faced young man.

"Baltek, how about Jaim Umek?"

Baltek smiled sardonically. "We are slowly driving him to desperate measures, sir. One by one, we have bottled him up and picked off his colleagues. And now, sir, we are ready. We have set a trap for him that can't fail. We will have him within our suppressor fields so that the bomb he carries in that hollow tooth can't go off. It will be simple to nab him then."

Mordegg's black eyes glittered. "Excellent! I'll let you attend to the whole thing, then."

Baltek nodded. "I won't fail; I have a spy planted in his organization who is bringing me information about Umek regularly. Unless he actually contacts a Police officer, we're perfectly safe."

Mordegg smiled unpleasantly. "Just bear in mind that if he does contact the Police, I'll need a new Secret Police Chief."

"Don't worry, sir," said Baltek calmly. "I have no intentions of going the way of my predecessor."

"Spoken like a true Videllian," said Mordegg. He cut off the visiphone.

"The time has come for our final stroke," Umek said, "It's an all-or-nothing job." His voice sounded tight in his throat.

The four of them were sitting in an armored ground car less than a mile from the fortress within which Leader Mordegg and his men pulled the strings that ran a world.

"I don't like it," said Smed Hober gruffly. "You drag us out here in the middle of the night without telling us what's going on and expect us to fall in with whatever it is that you have in mind. Why?"

"Why?" the old man smiled in the gloom that surrounded the parked car. "Because I fear a leak. If none of you knows what we're going to do, then none of you can tell anyone else."

Jay Denner narrowed his blue eyes. "You're insinuating that one of us is a traitor?"

"I don't know," Umek confessed. "I am simply making sure that there is no leak. Frankly, I do not suspect anyone of you three; if I did, I wouldn't have you with me on this mission. But, if one of you is, we'll be ready to pull this off before the guilty one can do anything about it."

Bety Cardill smoked a cigarette and said nothing, but her green eyes were watching the others closely.

"What's the pitch?" asked Smed Hober.

The old man put the tips of his fingers together. "I've found that Mordegg intends to strike a blow at the Sivarn worlds within a week. He has already partially undermined their government. No warning will get to the Interstellar Police in time. *We must get word to Main Base!*"

"How?" asked Denner.

Umek looked at the tall, blond giant. "You're a young man, Jay, but you've shown that you have guts. You'll

need every bit of them in this."

"Quit beating around the bush, Umek," Hober growled.

"Very well. We're going to invade the Grand Palace itself! There is one subradio we can use—the only one on the planet!"

"Are you nuts, Umek?" Hober's voice was a bellow. "The four of us? We'd never make it!"

Umek smiled. "Would you say we could make it if Captain Jason Flint went with us? An officer of the Interstellar Police?"

Hober frowned and said nothing.

"Remember the training those officers get. The Police don't start with young men; they start with children. From the time they are five years of age, they are trained, physically and mentally, to be the finest specimens of humanity in the Galaxy. They can outwit, outfight, and if necessary, outrun anything on two legs.

"And, too, they've got defense mechanisms that very few people even realize exist."

Jay Denner nodded. "We know all this. Is this Captain Flint going with us, then? Five of us are going to sneak into that fortress?"

"Only four," said Bety Cardill, speaking for the first

time. "You see, gentlemen, I am Captain Jason Flint."

"A woman?" said Hober. "I don't believe it!" He jerked his head around and glared at Jaim Umek. "You really are crazy, Umek! How do you know this girl is Flint?" He looked at her again and then at Jay Denner. "I suddenly realize that none of us really knows each other. I'm not going anywhere with any of you!" He started to reach for the door handle.

"Stop!" A blaster had appeared suddenly in Umek's hand. "You're going nowhere, Hober."

The big man's eyes blazed, but he said nothing.

"Just how are we going to get into the fortress?" Jay Denner interrupted calmly. "Have you any ideas, Captain Flint?"

The girl smiled. "I know what you're thinking. The castle is guarded by detector fields; they'd spot us on their screens before we got within a hundred yards of the place." She reached into a briefcase she was holding and pulled out four belts, each of which had a small box connected to it. "These are field neutralizers," she said. "When we wear these, we're invisible, as far as the detectors are concerned. Of course, human beings could

see us, but the guards rely on their detectors; they don't keep a visual watch."

Umek looked at Smed Hober. "Would anyone but a Police officer have devices like that?"

Hober had lost his truculence. "I guess not," he said slowly. "All right, I'm with you. Let's go."

Between the great fortress and the nearby city lay a swath of burned ground. It was half a mile wide, and within that strip, nothing moved, nothing lived; it had been burned to sterility by the heavy ray projectors on the walls of the fortress. Any human being, any animal, any moving thing that came within that area instantly set off the detector alarms, and the projectors fired automatically.

As the little group reached the edge of the area, Smed Hober stopped. He looked at the girl. "After you, Captain Flint," he said with heavy significance.

The girl smiled. "You don't think the neutralizers will work?" She shrugged and strode on toward the fortress, across the burned and blackened ground. One by one, the others followed, with Jay Denner following in the rear.

The group walked stealthily

across half a mile of cinders and slag until they came at last to the wall of the fortress.

"How do we get in?" Hober asked.

"This way," old Umek whispered. "There's a secret entrance near here that I don't think Mordegg knows about."

They crept along the wall for several yards until Umek finally held up his hand. "Here we are. Pray that it works." He felt with his fingers against the refractalloy wall. There was a subdued click, and a section slid open, revealing an oblong of blackness.

"Inside, quickly," Umek said.

The four went in, and the old man closed the door behind them. The lights came on automatically.

And, in that instant, Smed Hober drew his blaster and fired. The girl didn't even have time to scream before she dropped to the floor, her midsection burned away by the searing beam.

The IPS *Skyfire* hung, invisible and undetectable, above the capitol of Delgon III. Her second-in-command, Lieutenant Blord Mayne, watched the precision chronometer on the wall. "If all goes well, we'll be ready to drop in ten minutes. If it doesn't—"

Ensign Derth shrugged. "If the defenses of the fortress don't go down, we'll have to blast our way in. But I'm not worried. Captain Flint hasn't missed yet."

Mayne looked at him. "Son, never take anything for granted, not even Captain Flint. Is everything else according to plan ready?"

Derth checked the screen. "Yes, sir. The Delgonian forces have no idea how easily we penetrated their screen. If we can take the fortress, the fleet can smash the Delgonians easily."

"All right," Mayne said. "Meantime, let's hope Flint gets through."

In the same instant that the girl dropped, Jalm Umek, moving surprisingly fast for a man of his age, leveled his blaster at Smed Hober and fired.

"So you're the spy!" he snarled between clenched teeth.

But, to the old man's amazement, the energy beam was stopped a full inch away from Hober's body. It splashed harmlessly off a hard-held body screen.

"I'm not your spy," the barrel-chested man said calmly. He reholstered his weapon and pointed at the girl. "Peel that

face-mask off and see for yourself."

With a look of astonishment and fear on his face, the old man knelt and felt under the girl's chin. The flesh mask that was her face peeled off easily. The face beneath it was not even remotely human. Dead green eyes glared up in hate from a purple-scaled, skull-like countenance.

"I—I don't understand," said Umek weakly. "How—when did you know? What is this thing?"

Hober looked down at the corpse. "That's a Videllian. So, I think, is Leader Mordegg and some of his staff. Perhaps all of them. You see, for some reason, the Videllians hate the human race with an unholy hatred. Our conquering of the Galaxy has made them insanely jealous." Then the big man smiled gently. "As for how I knew—I knew when she said she was Captain Flint."

"Then you are—?" Umek's eyes were wide.

"Captain Jason Flint at your service," came the reply. "Now let's go. We've got to cut off the defenses in this fortress within ten minutes. The *Skyfire* is a few miles above us, waiting to smash in here as soon as the screens go dead. And we'll have to move

fast; Mordegg and his men know we're in here."

"How do they know?" Umek asked. "They'd have killed us by now, if they did!"

As they moved on down the corridor, blasters in hand, the big man jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "You don't think that Videllian really had field neutralizers, do you?" He tapped the box at his belt. "These things are phonies. The Videllians wanted two things. They want you—alive, and they wanted to know if there was any way in here that they didn't know of. They knew that you, as a politician of the old Government, would know about any such thing. I took a chance with the Videllian. There were other ways that I could have gotten us in here, but if they were going to let us in, I figured I might as well take advantage of it. Now, let's move a little faster. Mordegg will know by now that we've killed the 'girl'. She had a detector activator on her, and they know that's not moving."

"Good God!" It was Jay Denner. The blond young man was jerking off his belt. "These phony field nullifiers! They probably have tracers in them! Quick!"

He flung the belt down the corridor, back the way they

had come. Quickly, Umek and the big man did the same.

"If they don't know where this corridor is," Denner went on. "they won't know where we'll come out. Quick, Umek, which way to the defense controls?"

"You—you mean we don't need to send for the IP ships?" So much had happened in the last few minutes that the old man was lost.

"Of course not," said the barrel-chested man in his deep baritone voice. "The entire fleet is out there, waiting for us to cut the defenses. Let's go."

"This way," said Umek.

Leader Mordegg smiled grimly to himself as he watched the motions of the three figures on the spy ray screen.

"The fools," he said softly. "Human beings are so stupid! It's a wonder to me that they ever managed to get off their stinking little planet, much less overrun the Galaxy like the vermin they are."

Baltek stepped up beside him. "So there were no other secret corridors in this castle except for the one we found, eh?"

Mordegg shook his head. "Not unless that old fool, Umek knows of others. I pre-

sume our men are waiting for them in the control room? That seems to be where they're headed."

Baltek smiled nastily. "They'll get a hot reception, sir. I've got three semi-portable projectors in there. That Captain Flint's body screen may be able to stop a hand weapon, but it won't stop a big gun. Denner and Umek will be taken alive."

"I wish we could have heard what they said after they left Gishla's body," Mordegg mused. "I'm surprised to find that this Flint is really alive. That was Gishla's mistake; she thought she could claim to be this Flint and get away with it. For such stupidity, she deserved to die."

"Perhaps we should have put sound pickups in the other three belts, too," Baltek mused.

The Leader shrugged. "It would have done no good. They threw them away."

"It is rather amusing to watch them," Baltek said.

At the door that opened into the control room, Umek paused. "This is the door, Captain Flint. There will undoubtedly be someone in there."

"I'll take care of that," the big man said. "Stand back;

someone may fire, and you have no screens."

He eased open the door.

And was immediately caught in the chest by the hot, powerful beam of a semi-portable ray projector. Fortunately, the ray screen around him held—for a time, at least.

He spotted the control banks for the automatic defenses of the great fortress and sprinted toward them. As he ran, another of the semi-portables blazed hot energy at his running body. Strong as it was, the little generator for the ray screen on his body couldn't take that much energy. Rapidly, it glowed red, then orange, and finally collapsed in a glare of blue-violet. At the same time, the third ray projector cut in. The clothing on the running figure dissolved instantly in the coruscating fire, but by that time, he had reached the control panel.

The body in the blaze of blue-white flame exploded violently, smashing the defense controls into a smouldering ruin.

Instantly, the lights went out, and the atomic-powered ray screen that had protected the great fortress died. The huge, permanent beam projectors on the walls and roof were useless.

"This way!" shouted Jay Denner as he grabbed the old man's hand and sprinted down the corridor. After the first blinding flare of the ray guns, they had not stopped to see more. When the explosion rocked the control room, they were many yards away, running down the suddenly darkened passageway.

Denner pulled out a flashlight without stopping. The beam gleamed ahead of them.

Jaim Umek was gasping for breath. Spry as he was, his age was beginning to tell on him. "I—I can't—go on!" he gasped. As he stumbled, the blond giant grabbed him with one brawny arm and threw him over one broad shoulder.

"We've got to get out of here," he said. "That spaceship is going to hit the fortress at any moment!"

At last the beam of the flashlight struck the burned corpse of the Videillian. Beyond it was the door that led to the outside. Denner pushed it aside and ran out and across the burned, cindery ground that stretched between them and the city beyond.

Not even then did he stop running. His long, powerful legs moved like tireless machines. He did not stop until they were back at the armored car that belonged to Jaim

Umek. Denner put the unconscious old man in the seat and turned to watch the fireworks.

As soon as the defenses were down, the *Skyfire* sent a signal to the IP fleet that waited just beyond the range of the Delgonian detectors. Instantly, the fleet moved in.

In the flagship of the Delgonian forces, Admiral Gervos saw the first sign on the detectors and sneered. "At last, after six months of waiting, the fool Police ship actually shows up. Blast it!"

But the Police guns blazed first, backed by the stupendous power of IP superatomic generators. Another, and yet another ship speared in from space, firing those unbearably hot beams. The screens of the Delgonian ships couldn't stand up against power like that; they flared into the ultra-violet and collapsed. When the ravening beams of force touched the metal hulls of the ships, the metal became white hot, melted and boiled. Not even solid refractalloy can stand up to beams projected from the energies of the Police superatomic generators.

Some of the Delgonians tried to flee, but the flashing swiftness of the great Police cruisers was more than a match for them. Ship after

ship went down before those blazing projectors.

And it was not until nearly half the fleet had been vaporized and bombed that the remaining vessels signalled that they would surrender to the Police.

Meanwhile, the *Skyfire* was dropping toward the vast fortress beneath it. She could not use her main blasters, as the rest of the fleet was doing, for the searing energy splashing from the refractalloy walls would destroy the nearby city, which Lieutenant Mayne had no desire to do. Instead, he used the needle beams, cutting the heavy dome into great chunks with the slashing rays.

The huge cruiser settled to the ground between the city and the fortress, playing her beams against the metal walls. Under cover of the searing rays, armed and armored Policemen poured from the airlocks of the *Skyfire* and ran toward the breaches in the walls. The ray screens they wore were not the small, easily-concealable type that would only stop a handgun, but heavy generators that could project a screen strong enough to stop the concentrated fire of a semi-portable easily.

Not until all action had ceased did Jay Denner climb

into the car and start the engine.

Jaim Umek opened his eyes. A man dressed in white was bending over him.

"Just relax, Mr. Umek; I'm a Police doctor. You're all right; it's just that, at your age, you shouldn't exert yourself so much." He smiled. "There's someone here who wants to see you."

Jay Denner stepped through the door of the room. *Denner was wearing the uniform of a Police Captain!*

Umek gasped. "Who—?"

"I'm sorry we had to play such a trick on you, but believe me, it was necessary. Yes; I really am Captain Jason Flint."

"What about Hober?"

"You see, we couldn't attack the fortress unless we could break her defenses first. If we had, everyone in Delgon City might have died from the radiation that would have splashed from the ray screens. We had no desire to kill human beings; we merely wanted to get the Videllians.

"We could get by their detectors easily enough, but a field nullifier is much too small to be carried by a human being, so we had to figure out some way to get a man in past the defenses of

the fort. The Videllians wanted you, and they wanted you alive. And you had sworn to kill yourself if they ever got you. So they decided, at last, to set the trap which 'Bety' suggested after convincing you she was Captain Flint."

"But what about Hober?"

"What you saw was nothing but a robot, controlled from my ship. That barrel chest on the robot concealed a bomb; we knew it wouldn't be easy to shut off the controls; they'd be guarded. The robot had to be used; we couldn't conceal a ray screen big enough to stand up against those projectors. That's why we let 'Bety' get us past the defenses.

"There was another reason, too. Before they died, the Videllians sent a message to their home world saying that they had killed Captain Flint. There are many purposes in that, which we won't go into here."

"But you, Captain Flint," Umek said. "You look so young!"

Flint grinned. "It's one of my failings, but it's a help sometimes." He patted the old man on the shoulder. "You rest. Tomorrow, you've got to become head of the new government of Delgon III."

THE END



BEYOND cavil, the most widely and enthusiastically accepted science fiction author to vault out of the perishable pulp paper obscurity in the present generation is Ray Bradbury.

Product of a field where outstanding literary achievement is rewarded only by the adulation of a coterie of devotees and a few cents a word from the publications, his achievements, notable

by any standards, are unparalleled.

For example, in 1954 The National Institute of Arts and Letters presented him with the \$1,000 annual award "for his contribution to American Literature in *The Martian Chronicles* and *The Illustrated Man*," two integrated collections of short stories, most of them culled from the science fiction magazines. The same year, The Commonwealth Club of California gave him their Second Annual Gold Medal for *Fahrenheit 451*, the book title of *The Fireman*, a short novel which first appeared in GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION.

These were merely two of dozens of special honors heaped upon him since 1946 as the special quality of his work was recognized by a wider audience. Awards were not the only satisfaction Bradbury received. Following an almost continuous stream of sales to top-paying markets like SATURDAY EVENING POST, COLLIER'S, ESQUIRE, NEW YORKER, McCALL'S, SEVENTEEN and McLEAN'S MAGAZINE, he received a contract to write the screenplay of John Huston's *Moby Dick*, starring Gregory Peck. Reprintings and anthology appearances of his stories have mounted into the hundreds and the presentations of his stories on radio and television is rapidly approaching the one hundred

mark. When a new Ray Bradbury book appears it gets serious attention from the newspapers and periodicals that count. No one any longer debates his qualifications for the big time. The question now is how fine will his skills develop and how far will they carry him.

Usually an evaluation of an author will at least lightly touch upon his childhood, even if events there do not directly appear to influence his writings. In Bradbury's case, his childhood and teen years are a major consideration in his motivation.

RAY Douglas Bradbury shares with comedian Jack Benny the distinction of having been born in Waukegan, Ill. The date was August 22, 1920. His father was descended from an English family which settled here in 1630. His mother was of Swedish origin. A brother and sister died during infancy and he grew up with one older brother. Bradbury's infrequent references to his mother display considerable affection. He rarely mentions his father "who had a job with a power company," and when he finally pulls back the curtain in his dedication to *A Medicine for Melancholy*, published in 1959: "For Dad, whose love, very late in life, surprised his son," it is most revealing.

There are implications of a

not-too-happy childhood in his autobiographical sketch in **WEIRD TALES** for November, 1943, where he states: "Some of my first memories concern going upstairs at night and finding an unpleasant beast waiting at the next to the last step. Screaming, I'd run back down to mother. Then, together, we'd climb the stairs. Invariably, the monster would be gone. Mother never saw it. Sometimes I was irritated at her lack of imagination.

"I imagine I should be thankful for my fear of the dark, though. You have to know fear and apprehension in some form before you can write about it thoroughly, and God knows my first ten years were full of the usual paraphernalia of ghosts and skeletons and dead men tumbling down the twisting interior of my mind. What a morbid little beast I must have been to have around."

He also refers to his problems with youthful hallies and most pointedly, in his essay *Where Do You Get Your Ideas* in the 1950 issue of the amateur publication **ETAION SHEDLU** says: "One is not very old before one realizes how alone one is in the world."

Many of the tales of the weird, horrifying and supernatural written by Bradbury are derived from his childhood fears and are set in midwestern Waukegan. The same backdrop is provided

for *Dandelion Wine*, a connected series of short stories issued in 1957 which recreates with nostalgia Waukegan in 1928. But by the 1950's it is a plushier, more contented Bradbury assembling this book. He has a wife and three daughters, a fine reputation, a bank account, and a pleasant home. Therefore, the painful is subdued and the pleasant highlighted. Nevertheless, the youthful hero, Douglas (and Douglas is Ray Bradbury's middle name), has wove a few of his horror tales into the fabric, most notably *The Night*.

Bradbury's autobiographical sketches reveal an almost uninterrupted indoctrination in fantasy, starting before he could read. His mother read him the *Oz* series and his aunt let him have Edgar Allan Poe straight. Bradbury's introduction to magazine science fiction is recorded with preciseness. It was the Fall, 1928, issue of **AMAZING STORIES QUARTERLY**, featuring A. Hyatt Verrill's intriguing novel *The World of the Giant Ants*, and illustrated by the fascinating imaginings of Frank R. Paul, which were more than enough to evoke a sense of wonder in any normal child. The issue was passed on to the eight-year-old by a teen-age girl boarding with the family. From then on he was an inveterate fan.

THE depression in 1932 may have been one factor in the Bradburys moving from Waukegan to Arizona. There, he struck up a friendship with a youth who had an entire boxful of old AMAZING STORIES and WONDER STORIES and he borrowed and read them all. Bradbury also never tires of telling of his fascination with Edgar Rice Burroughs' tales of Tarzan and Mars at the age of 12, and how, lacking money, he pounded out his own sequels on a toy typewriter with all capital letters.

Two years later, in 1934, his family made its final move to Los Angeles. Richard Donovan, in his article *Morale From Mars* in THE REPORTER for June 26, 1951, refers to the Bradbury of this period as "a fat boy who wore spectacles and could not play football satisfactorily. Humiliated, he turned to writing."

A turning point in his life came in early September, 1937, when, while examining the books and magazines in Shep's Shop, a Los Angeles book store that catered to science fiction readers, he received an invitation from a member to visit the Los Angeles Chapter of the Science Fiction League. At the September 5, 1937, meeting held at the home of one of the members, he was handed the first issue of a club magazine titled IMAGINATION! The possibility that he might ac-

tually get something published in that amateur effort was the convincer. He joined at the October meeting.

Bradbury's first published story, *Hollerbocken's Dilemma*, appeared in the January, 1938, issue of IMAGINATION! It was scarcely a distinguished literary work; but its plot of a man who generates a tremendous amount of energy by "standing still in time" and blows himself and the city off the map when he resumes his normal flow, is repeated so closely in A. E. van Vogt's first Weapon Shop story, *The Seasons*, published in ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION for July, 1941, as to raise a question.

This story was almost out of character for Bradbury at the time, who apparently played the role of the club clown. One of the members described him as "the funny man of the Los Angeles League. In other words, he is the Big Joke." Most of his published works during that period were pathetically inept attempts at humor, both fiction and non-fiction. Today, they are the despair of the Bradbury completist, having been published in obscure amateur mimeographed journals with titles like D'JOURNAL, FANTASY-SCIENCE DIGEST, NOVA, MIKROS, FANTASY DIGEST, POLARIS and SWEETNESS AND LIGHT.

An amusing and surprisingly accurate description of Brad-

bury's physical appearance at that time was supplied by himself in the June-July, 1939, FANTASY DIGEST: "That horrid thing in the mirror has toddled through life wearing glasses, blue eyes, a frowsy hank of blondish brown hair, twin ears, hot and cold running drool, and a nose that would pass for a cabbage in a dim light. He has white teeth, his very own, and a reddish complexion (weaned on cat-soup, you know). He stands (or rather leans) to five feet and ten inches not counting the green familiar that rides around on his eyebrows on cool days and sings "Frankie and Johnnie."

Virtually every early personal description of teen-age Ray Bradbury by an acquaintance speaks of unfailing affability, puncture-proof good nature, constant buffoonery and self-effacement. He appeared a man without a tart opinion on any subject. The stark contrast with the fear-haunted, angry, sensitive and hurt Bradbury revealed in his later writings suggests a deliberate facade. A possible confirmation of this surmise rests in the appraisal of Bradbury, made by one of his closest early friends, T. Bruce Yerke, in a booklet entitled *Memoire of a Superfluous Fan* published in December, 1943. "The feature which marked him among the members of the group was his

mad, insane, hackneyed humor," wrote Yerke, "but underneath his ribald and uncontrollable Bacchus . . . was a deep understanding of people and signs of the times."

THE Los Angeles club was a very good thing for Bradbury. Among its members were selling fantasy authors Henry Kuttner and Arthur K. Barnes, and later, Robert A. Heinlein and Leigh Brackett. When he graduated from high school in 1938 he seriously gave priority to the notion of becoming a writer and the local writing members and frequent visiting professional authors found Bradbury a veritable leech, insatiable in his quest for the formula to successful professional writing.

However, not only did professional sales elude the youthful Bradbury, but even among the amateur science fiction fan magazines, which rarely rejected anything, he received a surprisingly negative response. There was only one thing to do. In the early Summer of 1939, Ray Bradbury mimeographed his own periodical titled FUTURIA FANTASIA. The first issue featured a cover by Hannes Bok, who was then virtually unknown, and a story by Ray Bradbury under the pen name of Ron Reynolds. More significantly, most of the issue was devoted to promoting a move-

ment known as Technocracy, Inc.

The Technocratic masterminds had a theory that the American economic system would collapse by 1945. They were prepared to step in with an appointive hierarchy of scientists, who would run the country with completely scientific preciseness and infallibility. They estimated that under their system there would be the equivalent of \$20,000 annually for every individual in the country redeemable in energy certificates. People would work four hours a day, five days a week. The country would be split into 100 zones and an industrial complex allocated to take care of the needs of each zone.

Bradbury said then: "I think Technocracy combines all of the hopes and dreams of science fiction. We've been dreaming about it for years—now, in a short time it may become a reality."

Bradbury today is scored for his anti-scientific attitude. His fear of science, misused, is real and evident. This attitude was not present in 1939 when he idealistically forecast that a country run completely according to the dictates of a scientific technate was a good thing. The fact that there were no provisions for elections in this system did not bother him because he felt, at that time, that a "limited dictatorship" was desirable.

Within weeks after publishing the first issue of *FUTURIA FANTASIA*, Ray Bradbury attended The First World Science Fiction Convention held in New York over the July 4th weekend in 1939. On July 7th he went up to see Farnsworth Wright, the editor of *WEIRD TALES*, with a dual purpose. First to examine possibilities of selling to that magazine and, secondly, to show Wright samples of the artwork of Hannes Bok, whose specialty was a haroque style ideally suited for the weird tale. The latter mission was a complete success. Wright enthusiastically purchased Bok's work and Bradbury was the instrument of that artist's appearing on the professional scene.

From the long-range standpoint, the most important thing Bradbury accomplished during his New York visit was to make the acquaintanceship of Julius Schwartz. Schwartz was then the leading literary agent specializing in the placement of science fiction and fantasy. His roster of authors read like a who's who of the period. The Fall, 1939, issue of *FUTURIA FANTASIA* contained Ray Bradbury's story, *Pendulum*, which was published anonymously. Bradbury induced Henry Hasse, an enthusiast who had previously sold a number of science fiction stories on his own, to help him rewrite it. This

Schwartz dutifully peddled as a collaboration, hoping Hasse's reputation would ring up a sale.

The Summer of 1941 Julius Schwartz and popular science fiction writer Edmond Hamilton decided to rent an apartment together in Los Angeles for the months of July and August. Schwartz would vacation and Hamilton would pound the typewriter. The first afternoon, Schwartz strolled 50 yards from the apartment on Norton Street to where Norton intersected Olympic to be stopped by the call: "Paper, Mister!" He turned to discover the newsboy was Ray Bradbury! Bradbury sold newspapers every afternoon on that corner. It was his main source of income between the years 1938 and 1942.

BRADBURY was relentless. Before and after his newspaper stint he was everlastingly underfoot at the Schwartz-Hamilton apartment. The situation became all but impossible when on July 18, 1941, news arrived that *Pendulum* had been purchased for \$27.50 by SUPER SCIENCE STORIES. This story, which appeared in the November issue of that magazine, told of a scientist of the future, who in demonstrating a new discovery, accidentally kills two dozen of the world's leading savants. As punishment, he is imprisoned in a

giant swinging pendulum. The motion renders him almost immortal and he watches the centuries pass, ultimately to dissolve into dust when invaders from outer space stop the action of the pendulum. In both writing and plotting the story was below the minimum level of acceptability even for that period.

Credit for the discovery of Bradbury (despite the fact that he was paid for a short non-fiction bit in SCRIPT seven months earlier) belongs to Alden H. Norton, who had taken over the editorship of SUPER SCIENCE STORIES only a week previously from Fred Pohl. Norton went on to become Associate Publisher of Popular Publications.

Another collaboration with Henry Hasse, *Gabriel's Horn*, was going the rounds and would eventually sell to CAPTAIN FUTURE, but at the moment Bradbury's chief consideration was how to accomplish personal sale number two. He dug into the files of FUTURIA FANTASIA and in its fourth and final issue published in Summer, 1940, found *The Piper* under his pen name of Ron Reynolds. Back he went to the doorstep of Schwartz's apartment. It was a hot day and both of them sat down on the curb of the street, revising *The Piper* according to Schwartz's instruction. Whenever they took a break, Bradbury would have a

hamburger with a malted, the two food items that were the staples of his diet.

The Piper was the first sale Bradbury made on his own, and his first tale of Mars. As it appeared in *THRILLING WONDER STORIES* for February, 1943, it told of the last civilized Martian who lures a primitive race out of the hills, through music, to destroy the Jovians who are exploiting the planet. The original version in *FUTURIA FANTASIA*, while inferior, was much closer to the style Bradbury would eventually adopt. Instead of Jovians, the exploiters of Mars were Earthmen. The description of the Red Planet's cities is very close to *The Martian Chronicles*. This story pointedly reveals that in initially attempting to ape the methods of the selling writers, Bradbury was ill-advised. He would have made it quicker and better on his own.

Bradbury had no one to tell him this. He rented an office with a typewriter and a desk and eight hours a day ground out stories, none of which sold. He eventually burned three million words of manuscript and in desperation detoured science fiction and tried to crack *WEIRD TALES*. He enlisted the help of Henry Kuttner, who actually wrote the last 200 words of *The Candle*. This very weak tale of the death wish and retribution was bought by

WEIRD TALES for \$25 and published in its November, 1942, issue. *Promotion to Satellite*, a short story of an Italian who dies in space while saving crew members of his ship and whose body is permitted to become a satellite around the earth as a monument to his heroism, was the next sale. This appeared in *THRILLING WONDER STORIES* for Fall, 1943. This story almost came off and showed early traces of the later, more successful, Bradbury.

UP to now, Bradbury had been trying to imitate other science fiction writers. In *The Wind* in *WEIRD TALES*, March, 1943, he chose as his model Ernest Hemingway; the hulk of a longish short story of a man threatened and finally absorbed by the wind is related in the trim dialogue so characteristic of the master. Hemingway remained a major stylistic influence thereafter. The May, 1943 issue of *WEIRD TALES* contained his short story *The Crowd*, clearly a variant of Edgar Allan Poe's *Man of the Crowd*, dealing with those people who seem to spring from nowhere when an accident occurs.

The Scythe, appearing in *WEIRD TALES* for July, 1943, was a chilling allegory of the Grim Reaper, but Bradbury really rang the bell with *The Ducker* in the November, 1953, issue. The story of Johnny Choir, who

thought that real war was a children's game and came through unscathed, was Bradbury's first tapping of the rich mine of childhood memories that was to make him famous. The reader response was so spontaneous that a sequel featuring the same character, *Bang! You're Dead*, appeared in the September, 1944, WEIRD TALES; the magazine requested and ran his biography, and Bradbury was off to his first big reputation.

The slow, discouraging progress in selling science fiction forced him to redouble his efforts on fantasy. The top market in the science fiction world of 1942 was ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION, and its editor consistently got first look at every Bradbury story and just as consistently turned them down. He finally invested \$45 in a near-fantasy submitted as *Everything Instead of Something* which was published in the September, 1943, ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION as *Doodad*. The story, a transparent take-off on van Vogt's Weapon Shop idea, concerned a store that sold gadgets from other time periods capable of doing virtually anything. The hero uses them to defeat a gangster in as pitiful a piece of fantasy as ever appeared in ASTOUNDING.

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION had a companion magazine, UNKNOWN FANTASY FICTION, which

specialized in off-beat fantasy. Bradbury succeeded in selling that magazine one of his weird tales. Ironically, the publication collapsed before the story could be published and *The Emissary* eventually appeared in Bradbury's first hard-cover collection *Dark Carnival*, published by Arkham House in 1947. The contrast in quality to *Doodad* was incredible. *The Emissary*, the story of an invalid boy whose dog regularly brought a kindly young woman to visit, has the pet succeed one last time in his mission after the woman is dead and buried. It was a minor terror classic.

So, reluctantly, Bradbury channeled most of his energies into the weird, horrible and terrifying. Drawing primarily from memories of childhood, he sold a continuous stream of outré, grotesque, bizarre tales with titles like *The Sea Shell*, *Reunion*, *The Lake*, *The Jar*, *The Poems*, *The Tombstone* and, probably most memorable of all, *The Night*, a magnificently realistic portrayal of gradually rising tension and fear engendered by first waiting and then searching for a child out too late and overdue.

One such attempt, *The Long Night*, fell into the category of a detective story and Julius Schwartz submitted it to Popular Publications' NEW DETECTIVE. On buying it, editor W. Ryerson

Johnson told Schwartz: "This Bradbury is beyond question the most promising writer I have ever read. He's going places and let me see more."

Schwartz passed this message on to Bradbury who began alternating his writing of weird tales with detective stories, eventually selling nearly a score of them to DETECTIVE TALES, DETECTIVE FICTION, DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE, DIME MYSTERY and NEW DETECTIVE. One of them, *Wake for the Dead*, in the September, 1947, DIME MYSTERY was science fiction, built around the concept of a completely automatic coffin. Another, *The Small Assassin*, concerning a baby that murders both of its parents, has become a Bradbury classic.

OCCASIONAL Bradbury science fiction appeared. *I, Rocket* in the May, 1944, AMAZING STORIES was an effective interplanetary adventure told from the viewpoint of the rocket ship. A little earlier, *King of the Grey Spaces* in the December, 1943, FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES, proved a sensitive presentation of the attitudes of a young boy trained, and finally selected, from among many, to go to space.

The most dependable market for Bradbury science fiction was the action-adventure pulp PLANET STORIES. At first he conformed to adventure formula,

even doing a revival of Robert E. Howard's Conan in *Lorelei of the Red Mist* in collaboration with Leigh Brackett. The notion of a morgue space ship, to pick up bodies after interplanetary wars, was unique, but his use of the theme in two stories, *Morgue Ship* and *Lazarus, Come Forth* was indistinguished.

Then it happened. A story submitted to PLANET as *The Family Outing* appeared in the Summer, 1946, issue of that magazine as *The Million Year Picnic*. In cash it was worth only \$32, but in reader reaction incalculably more. This story of the last family from earth, sailing down a river on Mars to become the first of a new race of Martians, was not only the first of his *Martian Chronicle* stories to see print, but one of the best.

Far more remarkable, but almost forgotten because he has never permitted it to be reprinted, was *The Creatures That Time Forgot*. This was Bradbury's second longest story, nearly 22,000 words in length, and had all the earmarks of an epic. Somewhere, somehow, the 26-year-old Ray Bradbury had been confronted by a "realization of mortality." In this story, which he originally titled *Eight Day World*, he envisaged a group of humans, stranded on a radioactive planet, where the entire processes of human growth and

life were speeded up to only eight days. "Birth was quick as a knife," wrote Bradbury. "Childhood was over in a flash. Adolescence was a sheet of lightning. Manhood was a dream, maturity a myth, old age an inescapably quick reality, death a swift certainty."

Bradbury's friend, Edmond Hamilton, based a short story, *The Ephemeræ* (ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION, for December, 1958) on a human race whose life-span was but 70 days, but even if this was the spark that ignited *The Creatures That Time Forgot*, no apologies were in order. At times, the efforts of the proponents to fight their way to a space ship that offers escape and a normal life before they die of old age descends to pulp section level, but the allegory is so powerful that the overall effect is memorable.

The year previous, Bradbury's hopes had been raised by the sale of a non-fantasy, *The Big Black and White Game* to the AMERICAN MERCURY. Then published by Lawrence Spivak, the AMERICAN MERCURY was a prestige magazine and though its rates were very low compared to most other general magazines, they were the highest Bradbury had ever received. Again, drawing from childhood, Bradbury attempted a mainstream theme of interracial tension at a ball

game. This story was selected for inclusion in Martha Foley's *The Best Short Stories of 1946*. This, together with the power displayed in Bradbury's science fiction was an augury. The April 13, 1946, issue of COLLIER'S carried his short story, *One Timeless Spring*, and the April, 1946, issue of CHARM, *The Miracles of Jamie*.

MADemoiselle published *The Invisible Boy*, a touching tale of a witch woman trying to conquer loneliness with spells that never worked, in its November, 1945 issue. The same magazine rang all bells with *Homecoming* in its October, 1946, number, it was selected for inclusion in the O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories for 1947. *Homecoming* relates the gathering of a family of witches, vampires, and dybbuks, as well as the teen-age boy among them who has been born human and is patronized by his more "fortunate" relatives. Here is expressed the yearning of children for some of the magical attributes of the creatures of superstition and fancy, brilliantly defined, with the hint that Bradbury's intimation of mortality was derived in his early youth from folklore.

UNDERRATED is *Defense Meek* in PLANET STORIES for Spring, 1946, which really is an early try and a nearly successful

one at the theme made famous in *Mars Is Heaven*, except that here a single mentally disturbed space traveler suffers from the hallucination that he is viewing earth scenes on Mars. *Zero Hour*, in *PLANET STORIES* for Fall, 1947, was billed by the editors as "one of the best science fiction stories we have ever seen. Perhaps you will think it the best!" It is another classic in the tradition of *Thus I Refute Beelzebub* by John Collier and *Mimsy Were the Borogoves* by Henry Kuttner, reflecting the gulf in understanding between parents and children and the resultant antagonism.

Bradbury had so far rarely received more than a cent a word for his stories; but now the rate on the science fiction climbed to two cents a word. *PLANET STORIES* paid that for *Pillar of Fire*, a total of \$250 for one of Bradbury's strangest tales. A zombie climbs from its coffin, the last dead man in a world that burns all its dead. Here we learn of the Mars of *The Martian Chronicles*. Here, too, the books have been burned and the burning of this living dead man will blot out the last memories of Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, H. P. Lovecraft, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and other masters of fantasy. When the authorities finally apprehend and burn this last dead man, *Pillar of Fire* becomes an enthralling

prelude to *The Exiles* (*THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION*, Winter-Spring, 1950) where ghosts of great writers of the past, biding on Mars, are expunged when the last memory of them is gone.

Mars Is Heaven followed in *PLANET STORIES* for Fall, 1948. A possible influence on Bradbury here was Stanley G. Weinbaum's *Martian Odyssey*, where a predatory plant conjures up visions of the most desired objects of its prey in order to lure them to their deaths. Earthmen land on Mars to find everything just like a midwestern town, down to brass band. They find their dead relatives waiting to welcome them, and then, while asleep in their memories of childhood, they are killed. Certainly one of the most original methods of repulsing an interplanetary invasion ever conceived.

In May, 1947, Ray Bradbury's first hard-covered collection, *Dark Carnival*, made up primarily of his weird tales, was published by Arkham House. Bradbury sent an inscribed copy to his agent Julius Schwartz which read: "For Julie, in fond remembrances of Norton Street—"The Piper"—The Moon festival in Chinatown—Li'l Abner—"Are you Kidding?"—That old song, circa 1941: "Daddy"—The beach—The Burlesque—And then New York and George Brunis—God,

what a beautiful night!—and because you sold almost every story in this book for me—With love, from Ray Bradbury."

Six months later, when Schwartz sold *The Black Ferris* to WEIRD TALES on Jan. 2, 1948, their business relationship was ended. Schwartz was a specialist in science fiction only. He wrote Bradbury and candidly told him that as an agent he had taken him as far as he was capable. From this point on he would be retarding, not helping to advance his client.

ON HIS own, Bradbury was already clicking with THE NEW YORKER and HARPER'S. A few years later CORONET would condense *Mars Is Heaven* and ESQUIRE would reprint it in full. ESQUIRE would also reprint *The Earth Men*, *The Spring Night*, and *Usher II*, all from the science fiction pulps. Bradbury had long been selling below his market. Bradbury could no longer be ignored. Newspaper and magazine critics were generous, but in the fantasy and science fiction field reaction was mixed.

It was common for critics of Bradbury to state that all he had to sell was emotion. This is considerably removed from the truth, which reveals he effected some permanent changes in the science fiction field. Richard Matheson was unquestionably in-

fluenced in the style, mood and approach of his stories by Bradbury. His most famous story, *Born of Man and Woman*, is a variant on Bradbury's use of childhood horror. Judith Merrill, who established her reputation with *That Only A Mother*, a story of a mother who can see nothing wrong with her mutated, limbless child, published in ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION for June, 1948, certainly owes some inspiration to Bradbury, whose touching vignette, *The Shape of Things* in THRILLING WONDER STORIES for February, 1948, deals with a woman who can see nothing wrong in her child, born in the shape of a triangle. James Blish, who went on to win a Hugo with *A Case of Conscience*, a novel of the dilemma of a priest on the planet Venus, where creatures exist without original sin, should bow respectfully in the direction of *In This Sign (The Fire Balloons)* published originally in IMAGINATION, April, 1951, which tells of priests who discover Martians without original sin.

Bradbury has won several law suits, including one directed against an hour-long television show, for appropriating ideas from his works. Obviously, there must be something more substantial than emotion and mood borrowed. Most significant of all, John Campbell's ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION got first look at

most of the major Bradbury stories, including *Mars Is Heaven*, *Zero Hour*, *Pillar of Fire*, *The Million Year Picnic*, and *The Earth Men*—and rejected them all as not being the right type. Now, it runs precisely that sort of story. Example: see *The First One*, by Herbert D. Kastle in the July, 1961, issue, dealing with the aloneness of the first man back from Mars and the gap he finds between his family and himself.

The Martian Chronicles (1950) and the collection *The Illustrated Man* (1951) gave Bradbury mainstream acceptance for his science fiction. The question has frequently been raised as to why the highly original and skillful tales in *Dark Cornucopia* and later, in *The October Country*, failed to gain similar acclaim. The answer is that there were and are many extraordinarily brilliant practitioners in the field of the off-trail, horror and supernatural. Men and women with superb command of the language and remarkable originality: John Collier, Ronald Dahl, Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, A. E. Coppard, Algernon Blackwood, Theodore Sturgeon, Walter de la Mare, Saki, M. R. James, W. F. Harvey, E. F. Benson, May Sinclair, and Lord Dunsany only begin the Honor Roll. Bradbury can stand above a few of them, with most of them, and below some of them;

but in that kind of competition he cannot lead.

THE reverse is true in science fiction. There, his ideas appear strikingly original and his style is scintillating. Stylistically, few match him, and the uniqueness of a story of Mars or Venus related in the contrasting literary rhythms of Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe is enough to fascinate any critic.

Mainstream themes and mainstream writing in a science fiction setting are Bradbury's contributions to fiction writing. In this he is singularly original, and magazines like *COLLIER'S* did not hesitate to run his minor masterpiece *There Will Come Soft Rains*, graphically depicting atomic disaster by indirection; or *To the Picture*, the attempt of a couple to escape from a 1984-type future into the relative freedom of modern Mexico City. In this vein *THE SATURDAY EVENING POST* will feature *The World The Children Made*, concerning a playroom in three-dimensional TV whose pictures resolve into fourth dimensional reality, or *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, where a prehistoric monster rises from his sleep in the muck of the Atlantic to respond to the notes of a foghorn.

One charge brought against Bradbury is true: that his stories raise issues on purely emotional

levels and offer no supporting logic for the stand. It is often difficult to determine which issues he artificially conjures for the sake of the story, and on which issues he is sincere.

This problem was resolved by the publication in book form of *Fahrenheit 451*, the closest Bradbury has ever come to writing a novel. This story presents in detail the basis of Bradbury's grievances. Because of this, the story of a future America where the job of a Fireman is not to put out fires but to burn books reads a bit slower than Bradbury's shorter works, but it is by all odds one of his best and most revealing. Reading between the lines, we learn that Bradbury's use of racial prejudice in *Way In The Middle of the Air* and its sequel, *The Other Foot*, is merely contrived and not heartfelt, since in *Fahrenheit 451* he rails against the minorities as a major factor in the censorship of newspapers, books, magazines, moving pictures, radio and television, a subject upon which he is most vehement.

It offers scarcely a word on religion—which was the core of *In This Sign* and *The Man*, so we may reasonably conclude that his use of this material was for impact value.

It tells us why he fears science, but does not tell us when he came to fear science. A good the-

ory is that it happened this way. Few things affected Ray Bradbury as traumatically as the Nazi book-burnings. His wrath and indignation at this action, his fear that civilization is today "burning" books—if not literally then through neglect—recurs constantly in *Fahrenheit 451*. A psychologist might say that since writing offered Bradbury his one hope of immortality, the destruction or loss of public interest in the vehicles necessary to convey his thoughts virtually threatens his soul. This very idea is the theme of *The Exiles*, where the spirits of great authors of the past vanish one by one, as the final copies of their books are burned or the last person who remembers them dies. In 1942 Technocracy, Inc., placed advertisements in 100 American newspapers demanding an end to U.S. aid to allies fighting Nazi Germany.

The technocracy which Ray Bradbury has so idealistically supported was now allied with the burner of books. Science was after all merely the instrument, not the savior, of mankind. In the wrong hands it could destroy the world.

Bradbury is today an important writer on the American scene, but his emphasis on science fiction seems to be a thing of the past. His current output is not even mainstream; it is con-

CHAPTER IX

I Rescue Iblin

THERE stood before me, stretching his arms wide and howling with some difficulty, the first fat man I had seen on Mars.

On the far side of the building, I found, were cage-like structures for the dogs and the dulgabs. After ordering my animals to remain in there until I called, I followed the innkeeper back around the building to the metal door.

From here a circular ramp led down to the lower levels. I stopped at the first level to pay my board and lodging with the heavy little red beads (rubies, I think they were) that the Martians use for money, since gold is far too plentiful.

I drew a puzzled glance from mine Martian host when I laughed because the little cage at which I paid was so much like a cashier's corner in innumerable little restaurants on a planet millions of miles away.

My room proved to be on the third level down.

I was shown from my room to the "messroom," which I suppose would be translated in English variously as "lobby," "barroom" or "restaurant." It was on the first level below ground. Here, gathered about the great solid, curved blocks of quartz that served as tables, were seated some score or more of Martians, all of the Iblin class, or Freemen. This I gathered from the green sashes they wore, like my own, with which Banar had outfitted me.

In a far corner of the room was a little party of four, obviously strangers to the village, for like myself they seemed to be interested in their surroundings. They surveyed their neighbors with some curiosity. Two of them were Egoins—Lester Lorda. They wore the red sash distinctive of their class. The other pair were Iblin.

A couple of slaves, obviously members of the party and not his attendants, garbed in the black that de-



noted their position in life, hovered in the background with big bows and jugs.

There was a vacant table near the group, and I moved toward them, as unconcernedly as I could. They seemed to take no notice of me.

Almost immediately the name "Gokko," although uttered in a hushed tone, caught my ear. I strained to hear more, but without much success for awhile, for one of the inn's servants was placing my food before me.

Later I heard the city of Gokko mentioned a few times, and there was something said about the seaworthiness of a certain wheelboat, and the necessity of guarding someone well under pain of Gokko's violent displeasure.

I had no doubt it was Lirin to whom they referred, and that this was the party I was after. Certainly there was something furtive about their manner, something sly that argued there was no good in the business that had brought them here.

I felt for the little automatic under my shirt, and casually unfurled the garment a bit at the neck that I might reach it quickly. None of those in the room had taken particular notice of me as yet, and I was thankful for the rather dull light thrown by the crystal bowls placed in recesses along the walls, in which wicks floated.

I was thankful, too, for the Martian custom that did not require men to uncover indoors, although women were supposed to—a curious reversal of the practice on Earth.

I was trying to decide upon my next step when fate took the initiative.

There was a sudden commotion near a triangular door that gave access to one of the lower level ramps. A slender girl in the black gird of a slave dodged frantically among the tables toward the group I was watching. Her progress was marked by growls and resentful glances.

One or two Idin half rose in their places, then sank back again quickly enough when they saw the red robes of the Epsin, who had risen in some alarm as the slave girl fought her way toward them.

But, once she had made her breathless report, the four men, followed by the girl and the two slaves, dashed for the ramp.

In the excitement, I followed.

A turn in the ramp stifled the commotion behind us, and I heard the patter of the conspirators' running feet as they circled downward. I leaped after them, closing the gap quickly, and stopped barely in time to avoid turning another corner and crashing full into them. They paused at the fourth level down and threw aside the leather curtains that concealed a triangular door. With a rush they were through.

In addition to the two Epsin, there were four or five Idin in the room, and several slaves of both sexes. They had spread out and were cautiously closing in on a far corner of the room where a slim girlish figure, almost devoid of clothing and bleeding from

an ugly gash on the arm, stood at bay.

In one hand she had a spring-gun, with which she kept threatening her enemies, as one or another of them took a chance and tried to advance a step. In her other hand she held my large automatic.

Here then was Lirin of the Ta n'Ur, the golden-haired, blue-eyed Amazon of the Southern clan whom I had sworn to rescue. Lirin, gloriously waging the battle of her life against a band of Martian vultures, who leered evilly at her gleaming body, yet respected the deadliness of her weapons. Lirin—my wife!

Her clear sweet voice rang out now with scorn as she taunted and derided them. And they bowed back like a pack of wolves.

"Stop this folly! Throw down that weapon!" roared one of the Epsin, who seemed to be the leader, as he pushed his way forward to face the girl.

"Be careful, Uallo," cautioned the other noble at his elbow. "She means it. She'll do what she says. I know these clannish of the South. And the Ta n'Ur are the most desperate warriors of them all."

The other belated. "But this is ridiculous! She is only a girl, and—"

"The daughter of their leader, their Myar-Lar," interpolated the cautious one. "It is best to take matters slowly."

It was the psychological moment. I acted.

Stepping inside the door, I raised my little automatic and fired a shot into the ceiling. The conversation in that heavily walled room was terrific. It seemed to stun the Martians. Demoralization was in their faces as they swung about and saw me there like a storm, my gun half raised and a tiny wisp of smoke curling up from it. They shrunk from me.

"Come, Lirin," I said. "We must get out of here. You go first and clear the way. Use my gun if you have to, but I think there are none above who have an interest in stopping us. I'll hold this room back."

LIRIN looked at me like one who sees a happy vision and doubts its reality. I never saw her look more beautiful than at that moment, disheveled as she was and bleeding from the rather ugly gash in her arm. But there was no indecision in the girl.

With her little shoulders thrown back, her chin high and an expression of regal contempt for Uallo and all his followers, she stepped briskly to my side. For just an instant she paused and looked at me, an inscrutable something in her clear blue eyes. Then she dipped through the curtained door and was gone.

Her disappearance seemed to break the spell.

"Stop them! At any cost!" Uallo roared, and threw himself recklessly at me.

Instinctively the rest leaped with him. Three or four times my automatic roared; four of the enemy pitched headlong. But the distance between us had not been great, and even those who had stopped my bullets plunged into me as I went under from the combined rush, pulling the leather curtain on top of me as I fell outward through the door.

As fast as I could press the muzzle of my gun against a new mark I pulled the trigger, but my head was entangled in the curtain and so many Martians had fallen on top of me that I could not at once wriggle free.

It was then that I heard the heavier roar of Lirrin's gun. Five times, at evenly spaced intervals, she fired, evidently aiming with calm deliberation. Then all was quiet save for the groans of the Martians around me, and the curtain was lifted from my head.

I struggled to my feet, to meet Lirrin's anxious and inquiring gaze.

"Are you hurt, Daman-ih?" she exclaimed. "I was afraid they had gotten you. Now what shall we do?"

In a few breathless sentences I explained to her how Bazar had helped me, told her of my *dalyah* cavalcade as we raced up the ramp. We found the "mess" the inn's public room, deserted. Nor did anyone appear to halt us before I blew a shrill call on the whistle Bazar had given me. The great dogs and the yellow apes came racing to us around the corner of the building.

I made two of the *dalyah* ride double, and Lirrin leaped on the back of the spare dog after I had bound her injured arm with a strip torn from her garment. And then we were riding away from the village, through the yellow-green ferns and back across the plain toward Bazar's post.

CHAPTER X

I Become a Legend

"YOU'VE canceled the debt of life I owe you, Lirrin," I said to her.

She gave an odd, quick look and laughed. "No. That didn't count. I told you the slave is obligated to protect the master in battle—and besides, that is the second time you have saved my life. I'm doubly indebted now, Daman-ih, whether you like it or not."

"I don't—I mean, I do like it—that is—what I mean—I'm not accustomed to enslaving girls," I stammered. "Besides—"

Lirrin sighed. "Then you must be awfully good at things you really are accustomed to," she said, and looked abruptly away over the yellow-green prairie as our strange cavalcade thundered madly on.

For an instant my heart pounded. Did she mean—But, no. That couldn't be! Certainly Lirrin did not want to be a slave. She, daughter of the chieftain of a warrior clan. Slave! Why, the girl was technically and officially my wife!

There was no pursuit. Lirrin and I between us had accounted for nearly all of Uallo's party. It was my impression that none had escaped, except perhaps a couple of the slaves.

Presently the girl's eyes caught my own. "Before these suns have passed, the Ta n'Ur and our allies among the clans will be in arms against some or all of the Polar Cities," she said simply.

Then suddenly Lirrin was all emotion. "Well, let it be!" she cried fiercely, clenching her little fists. "It had to come! The legend must be fulfilled!"

"Legend? What legend do you mean, Lirrin?"

But that was all that she would say. . . .

In due course we entered the agricultural post from which Bazar and I had set forth such a short time before. Not twelve hours had elapsed."

As we drew nearer an *Idin*, or Freeman, rode forth on a dog to meet us. But he paused suddenly some two or three hundred yards away, gazed intently at us, then turned and raced madly for the post, waving his arms and shouting something. But he was too far ahead of us for me to hear what it was.

I thought no further about the *Idin*. But when we arrived, I was amazed to see no less than a hundred and fifty specimens, in full armor, drawn up in military formation. And at their head, in golden armor, a vermilion cloak over one shoulder, stood Bazar of the Gap. In the rear stood rank after rank of *dalyah*, minus armor, but armed with those terrible, short, broad-bladed swords. I halted in surprise.

As if he had been waiting for this signal, Bazar tossed his spear into the air.

"Hail to the Hero of the Legend!" he shouted. "To the Ajar of the Green Star!"

In amazement I turned to Lirrin, and to my still greater astonishment found her not surprised at all.

"I knew it," she was saying softly. "From the beginning I feared it!" And there was something of both tragedy and pride in the tear-dimmed eyes she turned to mine.

"You heard him say it," she continued. "The Legend of the Green Star! And you, Daman-ih, are the Hero of the Legend. And the Legend shall be fulfilled!"

And then this little golden Amazon with the green-blue eyes did the last thing I had ever expected to see her do. She faltered and tumbled headlong from her saddle.

In an instant I had leaped from my own mount and picked her up in tender arms. Poor kid! She must have gone through a lot while in the hands of Uallo and his villains.

Bazar too came running to us, offered to carry her into the little fortress. But Lirrin on Earth would have weighed no more than a hundred and fifteen or twenty pounds. To my murder Earth muscles, she seemed no more than thirty-five or forty pounds. I lifted her like a child and carried her into the building.

CHAPTER XI

Daman of the Ad Axin

THAT night, while the bright little moons of Mars sped swiftly across the starry sky and Lirrin slept,

* Captain Barclay's watch was of great convenience. He had found that the Martian day was about the same as that on Earth—*duodec*.

Bazar told me of the Legend of the Green Star.

"It is a strange mixture," he said, "of historic fantasy and more definite tradition. It has a great hold on the popular imagination, not only among us of the Polar Cities, but among the people of the Southern climes as well.

It is said that once, uncounted ages ago (Bazar went on), no man lived in this world of man, which was inhabited by great beasts and by the progenitors of the dalyahs, who were supposed to have stamped a bit as they walked, and to have had tails by which they could hang from trees. A quaint idea, that. To think of an animal using its tail in that fashion!

But there was another world, where the vegetation was of a much darker green, and where there were great seas and oceans, yet much land too, for this world was larger. And—another quaint conceit—there were men of many different colors living on this world: black men, brown men, red men, white men with yellow hair, and white men with black hair.

And among all these different kinds of men there was one race superior to the rest, for they were far advanced in intelligence, in the arts and sciences, and were able to make war with lightning and thunder.

Indeed, they had machines which would run themselves and accomplish in trifling time the work of many slaves laboring over a long period. And over these men—the men with yellow hair and green-blue eyes—there ruled a chief whose name was Daman, Ahr of the Ahr Antia, or Island Men, as these yellow-haired ones were known.

For although their land was large, it was surrounded entirely by an ocean, and thus separated from all other lands.

Now it happened in the course of time (Bazar continued) that from out of the void of space, there came rushing a little world or planet that had nothing to do with the sun. Daman's wise men, after making many careful observations and calculations, told him that this planet seemed certain to hit the Green World on which they all lived.

That in particular, this little planet would probably strike the Ahr, or Island, on which they had their dwelling places. Daman's wise men even went so far as to say that the roving planet would most certainly destroy the Ahr, probably the whole world, so that all men would be killed.

It was then that Daman put other wise men to work, constructing a great ship which would fly through the void of space, just as many of the ships of the Ahr Antia at that time were able to do. Together with many thousands of his people, Daman set forth, facing through space from the doomed world in the hope of finding another which would be habitable.

In time they are supposed to have landed here on Mars, and after centuries of struggle, to have slain all the great beasts and domesticated the dalyahs.

But in the meantime, through the great losses which they used to magnify sight, they saw the little world hit the big one from which they had fled and then

bounce off again, taking with it much of the material of the big world. This became a moon, only much farther away than our two moons, and much larger.

But only portions of the big world appeared to have been destroyed. It seemed to the wise men who watched the collision, that the big world had not been hit where they thought it would be, but on the other side.

Now (said Bazar) there had been many more thousands of the Ahr Antia who had refused to risk the voyage away from the Green World with Daman, their Ahr. Daman wondered if these people might not have escaped annihilation, after all. So he had his great space-traveling ship repaired, and left on a visit back to the Green World, promising to return to his people here.

That, according to the legend, was the last ever seen of the Ahr, Daman. But belief, or fancy, or whatever you choose to call it, has persisted through the thousands of years since then that one day, in fulfillment of his promise, Daman would return.

Great interest, too, has centered around the romantic side of the legend, of which there are many versions of widely variant nature. The oldest and simplest form of the legend has it that Daman had no wives, and that when his people were reluctant to let him venture the journey back to the Green Star, he left behind him the girl of noble blood who was betrothed to him, and whom he loved dearly, as a pledge of his return. (Bazar concluded.)

To say that I listened to all this in astonishment would be putting it mildly. Bazar's description of the catastrophe to the "Green World," his reference to the "Ahr Antia" left me gaping. Do we not have our own legends of the lost land of Atlantis, which was supposed to have existed somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean?

Do not other legends maintain that it is from the immensity of the Pacific that the material forming the moon was thrown off? And have not many scientists in recent years receded further and further from the position that the history of man is as simple as that of an evolutionary rise from animalism and savagery?

Have these learned men not inclined more favorably to the theory that innumerable prehistoric civilizations, of which no traces are left, may have preceded our own?

"And now," Bazar said solemnly, "we come to the final links in the chain of events. Your name is Don Haskley—he pronounced it "Daman-ah"—while the hero of the Legend is Daman. Lilita is of the Ta-u'Ur, daughter of the clan's chieftain. It is one of the cherished legends of the Ta-u'Ur that their entire clan is of prehistoric kingly blood—and you have joined her in marriage!"

HEAVENS above—was I, doomed by fate, to live my life as a legend old beyond time itself!

"I will confess," Bazar admitted, "that when Galko's villain abducted Lilita, the Legend seemed

to be shattered. For the Alar Deans could not be conceived of as allowing another to take from him his mate. But the promptness and daring of your rescue only adds color to the story."

"It was nothing," I protested quickly. "I had superior weapons—" "Of lightning and thunder," Bazar murmured.

Me—Daniel J. Hanley—a legend!

"My strength is naturally greater, since gravity is denser on Earth than here on Mars," I almost shouted. "As befits the Hero of the Legend," he insisted calmly.

"And besides, Lirra fought as well as I did, and actually saved me when I went down under the rush of Uallo and his followers!"

"Which is only to be expected in a warrier princess of the Ta n'Ur—and the spouse of Daman," Bazar concluded triumphantly.

It was useless to argue with him, so I took another angle.

"Well, Bazar," I said rising, "it is certainly an astounding coincidence. But to get down to cases. My next step must be to get Lirra back to her own people."

"No," Bazar told me, also rising and bowing low with arms wide, in the Martian gesture of respect for superiors.

"The Ta n'Ur," he announced, "will be here by morning, fully equipped for a long campaign as the bodyguard of Daman-Ik and Lirra the Alar-Lar and Alar-Lar of Mars!"

"What—what are you talking about?" I gasped. "Have you gone mad?"

"If I have, Daman-Ik, so has my lord Almar, Alar of Borlan, who has learned of you and your fulfillment of the Legend. He personally instructed me to lay his tribute at your feet and to inform you of the irrevocable decision of all the Alaris—except Gakko and possibly his two satellites—in naming you Alar-Lar, Supreme Lord of the Council. Layani, the present Alar-Lar, is retiring, to continue only as Alar of Hekhan."

"But—but—" I protested, suddenly drained of further strength and expectation.

"They would not dare do otherwise, in view of the popular devotion to the legend. Besides, the situation is the most opportune that has ever arisen to deal with Gakko. For Gakko, with the support of Muir and Damar, Alaris of Trile and Yacodis, has determined to step at nothing to make himself the Supreme Lord."

"The army of Borlan already is on the march to the Gakalan border. The forces of Hekhan follow. Around the other shore of the Polar Sea, eastern, the Tuskidonia will threaten Yacodis and Trile, endeavoring to hold them neutral, but attacking if they are unsuccessful."

"Alar Udvare and his Ilronin will take to the sea, skirt both sides of the Polar Ice Cap, and attack the Gakalan coast, entering their operations on the city

of Gakko. And you, Daman-Ik, will be our Leader!"

CHAPTER XII

In the Desert

THE morning brought news by dog post. There had been desperate fighting at all the passes in the mountains dividing Gakko and Borlan, but neither side had gained advantage. The Ilronin had set forth in their fleet.

Layani, ex-Alar-Lar, with his Hekhan shock troops, was one-third of the way across Borlan in his march to reinforce the Ilronin in the mountains. Before night he would arrive with his bodyguard to make personal challenge to me and Lirra.

And the Ta n'Ur had arrived. They greeted us with a great shout and much tossing of spears as Lirra and I stepped forth, clad from head to foot in the blue of royalty. Every young man and woman of the clan was there, fully armed, to the number of nearly a thousand.

Lirra, taking direct command, spent the day explaining and demonstrating to me their battle tactics, mounted and unmounted. Before Layani and his Hekhanin arrived, I had a pretty good idea of what the Ta n'Ur could do and how to handle them.

In the late afternoon Layani and his troops arrived. I should have known better, I suppose, after all Bazar had told me about the use of dulys in warfare. But it was a shock to me to find that only the skeleton organization of Layani's force was human.

The men were known as "clintaris," and acted as leaders of dulys in squads of five. The squad normally took the formation of three abreast, two ranks deep, and in the "clintar's" position was in the middle of the rear rank. Thus, as he went into battle, he was perfectly shielded by his five dulys, and devoted himself almost entirely to directing their actions.

The clintaris were heavily armored, but the dulys wore nothing but the belts and shoulder straps that held their gear and weapons. All were mounted on dog-crests of enormous size, of a breed somewhat different from the animals I had seen so far. They were like giant mastiffs.

Layani came to where Lirra and I stood and laid his sword at our feet. For a moment he remained bending over it, arms stretched wide and palms down. Then he picked up his weapon and, straightening up, appeared to forget that there was supposed to be any difference in rank between us. Not, of course, that I minded. In fact, I should have been very much annoyed if his attitude had been scruple, I never could stand "yes-men." *

* "Yes-men" remain the curse of modern military machines. They seem to be considerably doubtful as to whether any general exists, under the domination of doctrinal political leaders, will practice that belatedly approved in successful strategy against the enemy. The Ilronin, apparently, though well-equipped, was demonstrably opposed. Hence they would fight with their hearts as well as their bodies.—Ed.

For some time, Layard discussed with us the problems of the coming campaign. Lirrin, I noticed, could hardly restrain evidences of scorn for Layard's forces. "Do the Ta n'Ur never use those great apes for fighting?" I asked her.

She tilted her little nose up a bit and sniffed.

"May the day never come when they do! When the People of Ancient Royalty can no longer do their own fighting, it will be best for them to die."

Not only that, but Lirrin announced her intention of personally leading the clan.

"Is that fitting?" I protested, afraid for her. "How can you be Alara-Lur and at the same time perform the duties of a member of your own bodyguard?"

She laughed softly. "Alara-Lur or not, I am first of all three-male of the Alar-Lur. Besides—"

"Nonsense!" I protested. "Then I'll be co-leader of our bodyguard with you, or your second in command." And at that we both laughed.

But Lirrin didn't like the idea of dual warfare any more than I did. From all we could learn, there would be approximately the same number on either side. Any way we looked at it, it seemed certain as though we were in for a long-drawn-out deadlock. And this would never do.

"It comes to this, Lirrin," I said. "Get Gakko—and we end the war, avert the necessity of butchering thousands of these poor animals, and save at least many hundreds of human lives."

She nodded slowly. "Yes—but how?"

"Your people are a desert clan," I pointed out. "Why could we not lead them westerward, around in a great circle below the line of habitation, until we are directly south of Gakko—then strike straight north in a piercing raid, take Gakko and capture Gakko himself?"

"He might not be in Gakko," Lirrin objected.

I disagreed. "I think he will. The Barakins and the Hoklains won't get far in their attacks through the mountain gaps. Gakko's real danger will lie in the attack of the fleet from Iriss, which will be centered on Gakko. He will be there to direct the defense of his city from the attack by sea. He won't suspect a raid directly from the south."

Lirrin's little face was grave. "I believe you are right," she said. "And below the gap, quite a distance out in the desert beyond the spot where we—we found each other, the Ta n'Ur have a big dog farm."

"For several years, in secret, we have been breeding a race of desert dogs. They are like, speedy animals, requiring little water, and capable of withstanding the heat and dust. With them I believe we could reach Gakko almost as quickly as the fleet will."

"Then let's do it," I decided, and my blood began to run faster with the knowledge of impending battle.

We took only Ilmar into our confidence. We left it up to him to spread some story that we had gone into seclusion to await the outcome of the war. Quietly we slipped away with five hundred picked clansmen. It took us a full day to reach the breeding grounds.

The dogs were indeed marvelous specimens. Like all other of the Martian breed, they were as large as horses. But in build they reminded me much of greyhounds, only they were much sturdier.

Morning came on our way, the clansmen scoring the weight of armor, but all carrying several spring-guns in addition to spears and swords.

I HAD given Lirrin my smaller automatic, and all the ammunition I had left for it. She had discarded the more cumbersome clothing of the north and all marks of her new rank, to appear in the light garb she wore when I first saw her. I too adopted the dress of the Ta n'Ur, with no distinguishing mark of rank.

It was near noon of the second day when we approached a ridge that looked like the rim of a great circle, toward which the dusty floor of the desert swept up gradually. We halted and looked down.

The ridge curved away from us to the north and south until it was lost on the horizon. Ahead of us was a gigantic depression, the other side of which was hardly visible on the western horizon. It was an immense crater, at least four miles deep. I judged the ground sloping down sharply from our feet at an angle of forty-five degrees or more.

We descended to gaze upon a sight which, despite its drab monotony and the ugly shade of the dust, had by its very size the element of grandeur.

There was a small pile of quartz near my foot. I picked it up and threw it far out. It flashed in the sun as it fell, disappeared completely in a little fountain of dust when it hit. And a moment later the whole side of the crater between that spot and where we stood seemed to be in motion.

"Back! Back!" Lirrin cried, and blew a shrill blast on her whistle.

We threw ourselves, men and dogs together, backward just in time to escape slipping over the edge and down into that vast cavity, from which great clouds of impalpable dust were now billowing up like vaporized blood.

"It's my fault," said Lirrin. "I should have remembered that it was there."

"And my bad mistake in throwing the stone," I admitted. "I seem to have started a landslide that has spread for miles."

CHAPTER XIII

Attacked!

AT any rate, it was clear that we could not cross the divide. We had to go around. And the question arose as to whether we should risk going farther out into the desert, or cut around it on the north.

We decided ultimately on the latter course. So, keeping well away from the edge, we circled northward. We had traveled some miles further on when we ran into one of those rarest of phenomena on Mars—a

breeze. A wind of this nature always portends a hurricane; and in the desert section, the most terrible of dust storms.

We noticed in time when the great red, billowing cloud on our left, over the crater, began to drift across our path.

Quickly we dismounted and formed a number of circles, the great dogs crouching and whimpering in deep growls while their riders wrapped their charges' heads in cloths, and then attended to themselves. We barely had time ourselves to huddle thus and protect our own heads when the dust swept down on us.

Day became night. The howling wind tore at our garments, and our skin blistered under the assault of dust and sand that were hurled over us. To take one's head out of the cloth meant almost instant suffocation.

Then my heart stood still. For some reason, the cloak that should have been at Lirrin's saddle was missing. She had just wrapped her dog's head in one that a clansman tossed to her, and thought of herself only when the first blast of stinging dust swept by. Half blinded and in a sudden panic of fear, she began to run, crying out hysterically.

A single leap took me to her side, although the shrieking wind nearly tore my own cloak from my grasp. I drew her down beside me, under its shelter, and put a protecting arm around her trembling form. She nestled close, still quivering. And I thrilled to feel her arm encircling me.

I don't know how long that storm lasted, but it must have been a matter of hours. When at last it was over and we had struggled to our feet, cowering aside the dust-laden cloak, Lirrin did not release my hand at once. And then, suddenly conscious of this, she gently pulled her hand away—and blushed.

All around us now the clansmen were emerging. Mound after mound of red dust heaved upward. Dogs and men rose to their feet once more, and these billowed up more clouds of red dust as they shook and brushed themselves off.

We resumed our way. Through the rest of the day and the following night we raced on, the dogs settling down steadily to that long, easy, loping pace that set up the distance so rapidly. Dawn found us with our water almost exhausted, rounding the southernmost end of a great range of mountains.

At this point the range emerged into a line of low, rolling hills, and beyond these hills we came upon another stretch of red dust. Downward toward a band of vegetation it sloped, through the center of which trickled a tiny stream.

Here we ceased to refill our waterkins and refresh ourselves, after having first thrown forward a number of scouts. For we were now in enemy territory and might at any moment contact a Gakahn patrol. We were most anxious to avoid discovery, or at least to annihilate any force we might meet, so that word of our raid might not be carried in advance of our arrival at Gakahn.

The canal-valley, however, ran at about right angles to our route to Gakahn, and soon we were again racing on over arid land, which little by little revealed sparse and then more prolific vegetation as we advanced toward the fertile zone.

But early in the afternoon we halted in the protection afforded by a little depression between two hills, where a fairly thick growth of the yellow-green trees with their strange, pale branches gave additional safety.

"From here on, Duman-hih, we should travel only at top speed, but only by night," Lirrin said. "If there are any Gakahn patrols in the neighborhood, they will be only perfunctory in their scouting. It is hard to keep the dutyals at work in the dark, and there is little chance that we would encounter them after night-fall.

"By day we will keep under cover, rest, and maintain a strict watch, that no messenger from the regions through which we have passed shall get through to spread the alarm."

The plan seemed most sensible and I gave it my hearty approval. But Lirrin and I had no opportunity to further develop the understanding that was growing between us. We were weary almost to exhaustion. At least all the Martians were. So I took command of the first watch.

It was well that I did so, for so weary were the sentries that only by making my rounds constantly was I able to keep them awake.

I was making my way cautiously toward one of our advanced posts, located in a clump of trees whose chubbier branches were weirdly outlined against one of the moons, when I thought I heard a sound from somewhere beyond.*

My first instinct was one of suspicion. Yet I was not sure. Nevertheless I hastened forward, walking as lightly as I could.

Then I saw them, a group of struggling figures in silhouette, visible at a spot where there was a little opening among the trees, outlined by the gleam of moonlight. Our sentry was in their midst, fighting desperately and, true to the traditions of the Ta'u'Ur, silently as well. So occupied was he in avoiding the vicious rushes of the foemen who circled about him, that apparently he forgot to shout the alarm.

SUDDENLY they all closed in on him at once. It was too late now to use the automatic held ready in my hand. So I gave a great shout of warning and leaped for the struggling mass, under which our man had now gone down beneath a heap of sprawling figures.

There was a sudden sharp command from one of

* Sound travels somewhat differently on Mars than on Earth, probably because of some quality of the atmosphere. Moreover, there is an swirling of winds such as in an Earth woodland. The branches of Martian trees, when they die, become very dry and jerky. Consequently, difference in atmosphere and tree construction, when winds are crunched undisturbed, the resulting sound is very strange, almost indistinguishable to an Earth-visitor, etc.—Ed.

the riders, who stood a bit aside; a rider, I judged, by the outlines of his armor. The rest scrambled to their feet and began to run. I took them at first for dalyahs, but as they scattered out into the moonlight beyond the camp, I caught the gleam of white skins.

The rider, still half obscured in the shadows of the trees, turned to meet me. I heard the clang of a spring-gun, and a bolt whizzed past my ear. Then I fired.

By the stabbing flame of my gun, I saw the look of amazement and terror on the fellow's face; for his armor, which would stop a bolt from any but the heaviest of the Martian spring-guns, offered little resistance to my steel-jacketed bullet. He went down with a resounding crash of shattered metal.

As our sentry staggered dazedly to his feet, I called out to him to guard the rider. With mighty leaps then I flashed on out into the moonlight after the fleeing ghostly figures.

I did not fire again, for I was rapidly overtaking them, and my ammunition was precious. As they glanced in terror over their shoulders and saw the great leaps with which I was overtaking them, a mad panic seized them and they scattered pell-mell, running frantically.

Several of them I overtook and struck down. Naked men they were, save for short kilts and sword belts, but they were so terrified by what must have appeared to them as a supernatural pursuer, that none made more than a clumsy defense.

As they were fleeing in all directions, and since the ground on several sides offered promise of protection, I had no other recourse than to use my automatic, after my command to halt and my promise of their lives were disregarded. So one by one I had to shoot them down.

CHAPTER XIV

The Tables Are Turned

BY this time, of course, our entire camp was aroused, and the Ta s'Ur, spring-guns and weapons ready, were dashing up, Lirin in the lead. She was breathing hard, one little hand at her swelling breast as though to quell the beating of her heart as she stood before me.

"Oh, I didn't know—I—I couldn't think—I was so afraid that something—had happened to you!"

"It was nothing to worry about, Little One," I said gently. "Except that a party of Gahkahrin, in command of a rider—whom you'll find over there with a bullet in him—surprised our sentry."

The girl's eyes widened. Disdainfully she touched one of the corpses with a cautious toe.

"Are you sure you got them all, Duman-ih? Because if you didn't—the warning may precede us to Gahalo."

I had had no time to count the fellows. "I don't know," I admitted. "I think I got them all, but I'm

not sure. I only know that I plugged every one in sight."

Lirin was thoughtful for a moment. "The best thing for us to do is to dash on ahead at full speed. If any of those Gahkahrin did escape, we ought to overtake them. We should be starting now, anyhow."

So we leaped for our saddles, and in a matter of moments were again galloping over the countryside in the weird Martian moonlight. But gallop as we might, we overtook no one.

As we raced on a thought struck me. "Lirin!" I called to her. "We should be able to trail the fugitives—if there were any—by the dogs. Let's give them the scent!"

She gave me a puzzled look. "Scent? Why, what do you mean, Duman-ih?"

"Let them smell something belonging to the enemy, and then trail them by the scent," I explained.

"What an odd thought!" Lirin exclaimed. "Can dogs on Earth do that? I never heard of a dog being able to smell."

So the dogs of Mars differed from those of Earth in more than size! And my bright suggestion was something of a dud.

We had now reached very flat country in the region of fertile, cultivated plains, and the problem of concealment during the following day was a big one. If we were successful, one more dash through the night would bring us to Gahalo in the bleak silence just before dawn.

At this hour dalyahs would be torpid with sleep, and we could count on meeting little opposition except from their masters. A headlong attack, pushed home silently at that hour, as the Ta s'Ur knew well how to do it, would probably put Gahko safely in our hands.

But the risk was great, particularly in the matter of concealment for the day. Finally, just before the eastern sky began to lighten, our scouts found an irrigation ditch, an artificial branch of a canal, along both sides of which melon patches stretched for miles.

The ditch was of no great depth, and it was filled with water. As this point then we decided to conceal ourselves. Fortunately the banks of the ditch were sloping. So men and dalyahs dove quickly, their heads pillowed on the shallow banks. If now and then a Ta s'Ur head might be seen from a distance, it would be of about the same size as a melon, and probably would attract no attention.

Lirin and I worked our way upstream about a quarter of a mile, to a spot where the ditch made a right-angled turn, raising our heads cautiously from time to time to gaze across the level ground. Two or three times we saw dalyahs laboring in the distance under the load of an overcoat, but there was no sign that our presence in the district was suspected.

Clearer we approached to the turn. Again we raised our heads cautiously. Lirin covering hers with her cloak, that her golden hair might not catch the glint of the sun. Yet all seemed peaceful. No living

creature was in sight, save in the distance. So we went on.

We had not gone twenty feet further before we were trapped. Here, on both sides of the ditch, the willow vines were unusually thick. And from them suddenly there sprang some dozen dalyahs, leaping themselves at us low and hard, smothering us under the water before we had even a chance to reach for our guns.

Coughing and spluttering we were dragged along rapidly, animal hands choking back our attempted outcries, while ropes of twisted vines bound our arms to our sides. Further struggle on our part at this time was useless.

Upstream a few hundred feet a Martian in the armor of a ristar crawled from the vines beside the ditch and whistled to the dalyahs. They brought us to the spot where he waited, and then with a sudden rush swept us off our feet and dragged us up the bank.

At the same instant a number of large dogs bounded up from where they had been crouching low, and in a trice we were each tied to a dog saddle. The ristar and his dalyahs leaped on the backs of the other animals. In a twinkling we were being tased across the plain.

I let out a lousy shout, for no dalyah paws were gagging me now, and twisted my head in the direction of the camp. But our capture had not yet been noticed. And my shout evidently did not carry that far; or so I thought.

As a matter of fact, the Ta n'Ue had seen our capture, had even heard my shout, but by this time they had also observed another thing that had escaped Liria and myself.

The fields on either side of the ditch, but at some distance back, were thick with dalyahs, some fifteen hundred or two thousand of them, whereas the Ta n'Ue numbered only some hundred odd.

ULDOR, who had assumed command at once, saw that to go forward meant certain destruction without any hope of reaching us. Without the concurrence of Liria's pride, he withdrew the clamorous swiftly and silently downstream, until they were far enough out of the trap to mount their dogs and race back seaward in a well-simulated panic—and at a pace which outdistanced pursuit.

But Liria and I knew nothing of this at the time. . . .

In no time at all we reached a road—the first I had seen on Mars—which ran beside another artificial irrigation ditch. River, perhaps would be a better word, for it was fully half a mile wide and, I gathered, quite deep.

At intervals of two or three miles were spaced little villages, similar to the one in which I had rescued Liria from Gakko's followers. Villages E. Kuther, groups of entrances to underground dwellings. And little gatherings of slaves and Eldin stood aside to watch us race past, eyeing with casual curiosity the slim figure of the golden-haired girl and the sturdy build of the man with strangely dark hair.

At length we came to a bridge, or more properly a causeway, for it was really more in the nature of a dam with many sluice-gates than a bridge.

Here we were met by a detachment of fifteen Eldin in command of an Eps, a Lesser Lord. And when Liria saw them her face fell.

"Fox," she whispered to me, "they are in the uniforms of Gakko's bodyguards. Gakko would dignify as prisoners *except* those he thought of the utmost importance by an escort of this sort.

"While we were in the hands of a mere ristar and his dalyahs, it looked as though our capture had been an accident. But now I am afraid Gakko knew of our coming all along. Someone—someone has betrayed us, Danna-ih!"

CHAPTER XV

We Reach Gakko

WE were allowed no time to rest. Our arms were freed; but then we were tied to the saddles of fresh dogs. Away we went at breakneck speed, over the causeway and up the road toward the sea.

The Eldin who raced at our sides kept strict military order and maintained a wary watch. But at length the Eps, a handsome though evil-faced young fellow, drew up beside us, and ordered the others to follow.

He glanced at me with arrogant curiosity and then at Liria, whose scanty desert garb concealed but little of her youthful curves. The expression in his eyes was not good to see.

"And so," he drawled at length, "Danna-ih, the 'God' from the Green Star, comes to Gakko! Is your name really Danna-ih?"

"It is Daa Hanley," I replied.

He scowled. "It sounds much the same. And did you really come from the Green Star?"



"What do you think?" I snapped. And at this he laughed mockingly.

"It is a good story, anyhow," he said, "and one that the people love to swallow. With what, pray, did you darken your hair?"

"That is its natural color," Lirin cut in.

The Eps turned to gaze appreciatively at her again with that expression that made my blood boil.

"Do that again," I gritted, "and I'll find the strength to break those bonds and tear you apart!"

He glanced at me in pretended surprise, as though he did not understand, but underneath was that air of arrogant mockery.

"I'll make a bargain with you, Damsa-lin," he said after a bit. "Gakko knows of your coming—but not of the girl's. These men are mine. Their loyalty is me in above even their loyalty to Gakko. Turn the girl over to me, and say nothing to Gakko about her.

"After I have delivered you at the Council Hall and am no longer technically responsible for you, I will contrive your escape. For Gakko surely intends to have your life," he added strongly to give weight to his own argument."

I saw Lirin stiffen in her saddle and turn scarlet. The Eps, misinterpreting my own silence, went on in the conceit that his proposal would be received as reasonable.

"The girl appeals to my fancy! To have a warrior lost of the Ta'u'u among my wives would be most interesting and undoubtedly amusing—"

He never finished that sentence. Although my legs were tied under the dog saddle, my arms were free. At that moment his mount brought him within reach.

I swayed toward the Lesser Lord and grasped his collar with one hand. With a wrench I jerked him clear of his mount—and planted a crashing blow in his face with my other fist.

"Now, Lirin, now!" I yelled. "Make a break for it, straight ahead!"

But the attempt was useless. The dogs on which we were mounted would not obey us, and in a moment we were borne helplessly to the ground by the onslaught of Dlin who leaped at us from behind.

When the pile was unscrambled I still held onto the Eps, choking and gasping from the twisting of his collar. I managed to drive my fist once more into his face before his minions pried me loose and my dog scrambled to his feet.

The Lesser Lord stood there spluttering and cursing, wiping the blood from his face. After a flood of invective he thrust his battered features forward into mine, for his men were holding me so that I could hardly move.

*The Lesser Lord's comment to Damsa-lin, his comrade-in-arms, is not to be wondered at. Throughout history, courts like Gakko, who depend on unscrupulous servitors to maintain their power, have been riddled in the back when they least expected. Indeed, from this history-given fact may come the simplest dramatic behind the scenes that "They who live by the sword, shall die by the sword."—Ed.

His voice rasped with bitter malice. "Were it not for Gakko, I would—I would—and by the seven Alarin, I believe I will in spite of him! When he does see you, I can tell him you were hurt in resisting capture—"

"And," I interrupted him sharply. "I shall tell Gakko of your reason to him! Perhaps Gakko knows enough of your reputation even now to credit the infamous proposal you just made."

He grew suddenly pale, in strange contrast to the blood on his face. His manner changed just as abruptly.

"Enough!" he said. "It was my mistake. I did not understand you—ah—viewpoint, or I should not have asked you to do anything—er—dishonorable in your own eyes. But I will offer you another bargain."

Ah—so I had won the upper hand, prisoner and all!

"Say nothing of this to Gakko, and I will agree that you and the girl shall have every possible courtesy and comfort as long as you are in my hands. Is it agreed?" he demanded anxiously.

"Agreed," I said; and at this the fear went out of his eyes, though there was much of worry left in his expression. Enough worry, I thought, to make him keep his promise. Or was it?

Through all this the Eps had sat with wooden faces, though once or twice I caught the ripples of a fleeting smile here and there among them. The Eps, followers may have been loyal, but evidently they were not personally displeased at his discomfiture. Lirin too was smiling a bit, but pretending she had noticed nothing.

So we went on, by easier stages now. Now were our legs bound so tightly, and frequently the Eps had water offered to us and several times food. Once we stopped for a rest, which was most welcome. But I knew that every time my back was to him, the Lesser Lord's eyes were boring into me with baffled hatred.

Finally we reached our destination. Gakko looked more like a great park or flower garden than the teeming city it was. For miles in every direction the gardens lay, diamond-patterned, between diagonal rows of streets paved in dull red, but with scarcely a building above ground. That is, if the little ornate structures constituting the entrances to the underground city were excepted.

JUST below ground another system of streets was laid out in squares, at an angle of forty-five degrees to the paths above. The main arteries of this underground system emerged at strategic traffic points beyond the city. The ground level, in other words, was in reality the "roof" of the city.

The gardens, each surrounded by a low wall made from fragments of the hiddest stone, were places of recreation, rest and amusement. Here an open air cafe, with tables of intricate golden metal or carved stone, where refreshments were being served among gorgeous varicolored blooms; there, a recreation

center, with crowds watching some game or performance.

Gakko's palace, castle, or Council Hall—whatever one chose to call it, for it served all these purposes—was an edifice of such transcendent beauty as I had never seen before. In general lines it resembled somewhat the modified pyramidal motif that became so general on Earth in the second quarter of the 20th Century.

The structure stood at the very edge of the Polar Sea. In fact, abortive little waves of that windless expanse of water lapped and broke against one face of it, and reached halfway down the two sides.

As we approached down one of the diagonal streets, my heart leaped with satisfaction. There before us lay anchored the Ebona fleet, our allies, about two hundred yards offshore: great raftlike, fashion-turned craft on which huge spring-guns were mounted. Every few moments one of these would hurl a ball-ton of rock at the castle, which would shatter quite lustily against the imbecient monolith, leaving its surface, as far as I could see, unscathed.

I cursed silently under my breath. It was quite obvious that the Ebona attack was nothing but a gesture. Gakko had more "men" than the Ebona could possibly crowd on their ships. Besides, the ruler of Gakko had the advantage of mobility.

No matter what spot the Ebona fleet might select for a landing, the defenders could concentrate a superior force there before the maneuver could be made effective. So Lirio and I had no hope of rescue from the ships.

CHAPTER XVI

Condemned by Gakko

IMEDIATELY on our arrival, we were hustled through the triangular gate in the base of the castle, on into a tunnel of the same shape, the walls coming together at an angle above to form the room.

The passage inclined upward, curving about until it emerged between battioned walls of the castle proper on top of the base. Our party was halted here by a shrill order from the commander of a unit of several sturdy young Amazons of Gakko's personal guard.

With some little military ceremony, and a malevolent glance at me, the Ego handed us over to the girl guard, and with his followers turned back down the pass.

We were immediately seized and shackled. Noting the fletters that were in readiness, Lirio threw me a meaning glance. I knew what she meant. This was but another evidence that our arrival was expected.

The girl in command surveyed us with interest, but gave me most of her attention. Evidently with my greater height and more muscular build than the average Martian, I was more of a novelty even than a girl warrior of the Ta'u'Ur.

These young Amazons were clad in armor, and little else. Each wore upper and forearm guards on the right arm with a large round shield protecting the left. A curiously fashioned corselet or short cuirass, held up by broad straps, protected the shoulders. Underneath was a broad girdle of heavy leather and metal plates, from which hung thigh guards and a kind of bracciere, a kilt of chain mail.

Shin guards and sandals completed the equipment, except for the short, curved, heavy-bladed swords they carried.

"Come!" commanded their leader shortly. She led the way briskly through a smaller rectangular gate into the castle, and there was much constant clanking of metal in the guard's armor as we followed.

Lirio spoke in low tones to the girl who marched beside her.

"I didn't know there were any girl warriors in the Northern Cities. I thought that only we of the Ta'u'Ur, and the other clans of the desert ring—"

"We are the War Wives of Gakko," the girl explained shortly.

"How many wives has he?" I broke in.

The woman, God bless 'em! Ask them for a little confidential information and they'll spill the beans every time.

"Thirty-one," she replied, her whole manner becoming more friendly.

"That is, thirty-one War Wives. The rest don't matter. They are merely slaves,

playthings. We—we rank as Egois and have all the privileges of men!"

Then, after a pause: "Most of us War-Wives are from the clans south of Gakko, on the other side of the desert ring from the Ta'u'Us. Gakko will probably make you one of us."

Lirio bent her head quickly to mine. "He will not!" she whispered tensely.

"You're telling me!" I whispered back reassuringly. "Are you really Dama-ih?" the girl on the other side of us now asked me.

"I am Dan Hanley," I replied. "Sorry to have to



meet you under such—or—disadvantageous circumstances." When I want to turn on the charm, it really gushes.

Warrior or no warrior, the girl was pleased. "Yes, that is what they call you—Danan-ih. And there are lots, too, who believe in you, and think Gakko should not oppose your becoming Alar-Lar."

And she gave me a look that meant plenty!

Further conversation, however, was interrupted by a curt command from the leader as we approached a grille. Through this we could glimpse a great hall decorated with luxurious and colorful hangings, magnificent carvings and statuary, and a riot of intricate, brilliant Martian flowers. There came to us the murmur of many voices, with the occasional shouts of men and the shrieks of women drunk with liquor.

We were motioned to step where we were. The girl in command approached a section of the grille and pressed on it with her hand. A cleverly concealed little triangular gap opened. She went in, leaving it ajar.

Through this opening we caught a better view of the great tables, of the men and women lounging or sprawling about on the benches and couches. The girl beside me smiled contemptuously.

"It's like this every day, since Gakko first hinted at his plan to be Alar-Lar," she said.

Lilrin looked at her sharply and then nudged me. I managed to get in a knowing wink in reply.

In a moment the leader of our captors returned, followed by an imposing figure of a man. The girl leader of the guard waved her hand towards us imperiously.

"Here they are, Gakko. They were just brought in."

Gakko, though neither as tall nor as heavy as I, was nonetheless a commanding individual among Martians. He was possessed of somewhat more than their normal height and breadth of shoulder. I judged him to be a man of about forty.

His face, though showing the signs of his dispirited, licentious life, nevertheless indicated both intellect and strength of will. He folded his arms casually and surveyed us with a kind of detached interest.

"So this," he mused, "is the famous Danan-ih, who threatens the peace and security of a whole world because of a silly ancient tradition."

I started to make a reply, but the girl leader shrieked a sudden command to "be silent in the presence of the Alar" and struck me sharply on the mouth. So I had to keep silent—especially since Gakko, for all his assumed carelessness of manner, took care to keep several of the girls between himself and us. But for an instant I was on the point of whipping out my concealed automatic and ending the matter then and there.

GAKKO continued to gaze cynically at me as his glance swept me invisibly from head to foot. For an instant a gleam lightened the lazy arrogance

of his eyes. Presently he permitted himself to pronounce upon my fate.

"The man is to be placed in a cell, just as he is, with food to eat and water to drink. But give him no other clothing, and do not let him bathe."

Suddenly conscious of my somewhat tattered garb, with the desert's red grime still upon me, I glanced down, puzzled as to the meaning of this strange order. For the life of me I couldn't tell what he was driving at.

Then for the first time Gakko turned and gazed directly at Lilrin.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, an expression of evil anticipation breaking over his face. "Another recruit—eh, girl?"

He laughed carelessly at the unfriendly glances the jealous young War-Wives threw at Lilrin.

"Let her have every comfort," Gakko commanded. "And bring her to me in the morning—at the Council—in bridal garb, for I shall wed her and then—but we shall see about that later. And, oh yes—bring the man to me at the same time."

And turning casually, he wandered back through the grille, which closed with a little click behind him.

There was an agony of pleading in Lilrin's eyes as she turned to me. The young warrior girls seemed puzzled and uncertain. They glanced at Lilrin uneasily. Clearly they saw in her a rival for Gakko's favors, and probably a successful one at that. They were at once jealous and fearful of her possible future position.

As the girl guards marched us along another corridor, Lilrin spoke in low tones to the leader. The girl shook her head in emphatic refusal at first; but Lilrin pleaded, and at last the leader relented. The party halted. Half of the girls dropped back a little distance at their leader's command and the rest went on a few paces, leaving Lilrin and me alone together.

Lilrin stood very close to me. "I asked her for just a moment, to say farewell. This is the end, Danan-ih. Do you realize it?"

There were tears in the green-blue eyes that looked up at me so forlornly from a white, drawn little face.

Paralyzed by a sudden rush of feeling, I stood motionless, half dazed, in the first true realization of my very real love for this girl.

CHAPTER XVII

The Crash of Doom

LILRIN must have misunderstood my silence, for she dropped her gaze and went on in a pathetically breathless way.

"Oh, I understand, Danan-ih, that I have been just an—an accident to you. That it was just the fulfillment of the ancient legend. But that isn't what I wanted to say, Danan-ih!

"I mean, Gakko has condemned you to death—or

be will in the morning. And I, who am your lawful bride—even if only in name—must die, too—if you do. But before I wed a Northern beast like Gakko—Here, Danan-lih take this gun! They'd only take it away from me anyhow when they dress me in the bridal garments. Please—"

So carefully I transferred the automatic to my own person. Lilrin could say no more at the moment, for by then I had folded her in my arms, clasping her supple young form close to mine in the glorious realization, at last, of what she meant to me.

"I love you, Lilrin, I love you!" I whispered fiercely.

She relaxed against me like one exhausted, and the tears were now streaming from beneath her lowered lids.

"Now I shall die happy," she murmured. "Now I shall have no regrets."

"We're not going to die—now!" I replied. I glanced at the warrior girls standing attentively along the corridor. They were regarding us with unconcealed curiosity, but seemed in no hurry to end our rather desperate communion.

"Tell me quickly, dear," I whispered. "How many of Gakko's people do you think believe in the Legend?"

"Oh, perhaps the great majority," she said, without any great interest in the subject, but with a wondrous look in her eyes as she gazed up from where her head nestled against my shoulder.

"Then my plan may work! For I believe I know now why Gakko gave me that strange order that I was to be brought before him in Council tomorrow just as I am now, dirty and disheveled."

Quickly I outlined the plan for her. As I talked the glow of hope and exuberance came back again into her eyes.

"Good!" Lilrin exclaimed when I had finished. "And even if it does not work, my Danan-lih, we shall meet death side by side, fighting to the last!"

She drew herself up proudly and motioned to the leader of the girl warriors.

"We are ready," she said.

So, with many curious glances and whispered comments, for obviously the girl guards were puzzled by the sudden change in our bearing, perhaps even awed a bit at the jubilant manner in which I was going forth to meet a certain death, they conducted us to the next turn in the corridor. Here,

after a hasty embrace, Lilrin and I were parted.

They took me to a cell in the tower, about halfway up, from which I had a good view of the westward side of the city and the shore. After bringing me food and a little water, they left me to my meditations and plans for the morrow.

First, I carefully inspected the two automatics, as soon as I was sure I was not under observation. I spent some time in practicing, until I could draw those guns from their concealed holsters with my old-time skill. Then, detail by detail, endeavoring to prepare for every possible contingency, I went over my plans again and again, until at last I dropped off to sleep.

In the morning, four of the warrior girls came to conduct me to the Council Hall. They led me to a grilled door; and while I awaited the signal that would bring me before Gakko, I had plenty of time to study the great room and the throng within it.

Gakko was giving the crowd a harangue that would have been a credit to an Earthly politician. A master of dramatic art, he was cleverly painting a picture of himself as the popular leader, while holding his cohorts

in suspense as to some great revelation he was about to make. He contrived to put across the impression that this matter would be one of great amusement to them, as well as to himself.

"And now," he shouted, "behold the fair barbarian of the desert allies, Ur Lilrin of the Ta n'Ur. Is she fair enough, I ask you, to be the bride of—an Alar-Lur?" And he put into this last phrase—a subtle suggestion.

My heart pounded as I saw Lilrin step forth with stately grace. Two of Gakko's warrior girls, weapons drawn, were at her side, and two more behind. Gakko, with dramatic dignity, stepped back a pace as with a sweeping gesture he centered the attention of the throng upon her.

There was a sibilant intake of breath all through the hall as Lilrin stepped forward; a murmur of surprise, and then a roar of approval. Her costume was so gorgeous, I could not have blamed the War-Wives for any pangs of jealousy.

Unnoticed for the moment by the crowd, Gakko glanced at the door.

Hastily my guards swung it

open. Before I had time to guess their purpose they seized me roughly. Pulling and jerking me this way and that, they hustled me out on the platform in such a way as to make it appear that I was cravenly resisting, and had to be dragged along.

From my appearance in such grimy and tattered garments, and from the manner in which the warrior girls were roughing me I must truly have presented a ridiculous contrast to Lilrin.

A roar of laughter echoed through the great hall.

Now Gakko was shouting. "Can this be the great Dananlih of the Legend, the Hero of the Green Star—the Alar-Lur of Mars?"

"No! No!" roared the crowd between gusts of laughter.

"I leave the decision to you, my people!" Gakko shouted, holding up his hand for silence. "Shall this fair barbarian be the bride of Gakko—Alar-Lur or of this false hero of the Legend who now cringes at my feet?"

GAKKO pointed dramatically at the spot where he expected me to be. For with this last speech of his as their cue, the girls who were guarding me began again to jerk me

this way and that. I sensed their purpose was to trip and hurl me headlong to the floor before him.

Well, I would have to disappoint them. In fact, what with my Earth strength and all, that was precisely what I did. To their utter astonishment, it was the four of them, and not I, who went sprawling when they attempted to hurl me at Gakko's feet.

In a single bound I covered the space that separated me from Gakko. When I felt the floor under my feet again I lashed out with all the momentum of my leap and every ounce of strength in my body. There was a sharp *crack!* as my fist landed on Gakko's jaw.

The blow literally lifted him from his feet and hurled him headlong from the platform and down the steps, where he lay an inert and lifeless mass among his own lesser lords.

For a moment breathless silence pervaded the hall. Not a Martian moved. Slowly, ominously, I stepped forward to the edge of the platform facing Gakko's minions, a gun in each hand.

CHAPTER XVIII

Alar-Lur of Mars

PROUDLY, calmly, as though on parade, Lilrin stepped to my side and stood quietly alert.

A murmur arose in the back of the hall. There was the clang of a spring-gun and the thud of its bolt somewhere behind me. But I had caught a glimpse of the gun, and I fired.

The roar of the automatic stunned the Martians, and there was silence again as the faint fumes of gunpowder floated hazily about me. Then the rintar in the back of the hall who had my bullet in his arm began to shriek. And pandemonium broke loose.

The Ildin — Gakko's Freemen—were milling about and struggling among themselves. Half of them were panic-stricken, fighting to get out of the room. The others fought because they were attacked, or because of they knew not what.

It was in the pit of the Epsin, just beneath our feet, that our danger lay, and in the warrior girls who had been guarding Lilrin and me. I was conscious that several of the latter were now circling in behind us on the platform.

Diversion came just in time to save me the necessity of turning to face the Warrior-Wives. Several of the Epsin made a rush at us up the steps.

Raising both guns, I hurled fire and lead at them. One after another they threw up their arms and tumbled backward or plunged sprawling on their faces.

Behind me I heard the warrior girls squealing in fright and scrambling down the steps.

"Thunder! Lightning!" one of them screamed. "It is Danan-lih in truth—according to the Legend!"

I glowered at the crowd. Wherever my glance fell, men shrank back, fear and wonder upon their faces.

I stepped forward a pace then and held up my hand for silence. The turmoil hushed. I pointed to where the lifeless form of Gakko lay grotesquely sprawled.

"There lies Gakko," I said. Then, tapping my chest, "Here stands Danan-lih of the Thunder and Lightning! Danan-lih of the Great Strength! Danan-lih of the Green Star! Are ye Gakko's men or Danan-lih's men — or is there perhaps among ye, one who cares to contest the claim of Danan-lih as Alar-Lur?"

I do not know how the thing would have come out in the end. I was in reality preparing to make a dash for safety with Lilrin, in case my bluff did not

work.

But at this moment I heard the soft swish of many feet, marching in unhurried military precision, coming through the grilled doors behind us.

"The Ta n'Ur!" Liltrin whispered jubilantly, but without turning her head. "They have gained entrance to the castle somehow. Uldor did not desert us!"

I don't know how long we stood there, not daring to show our own happy surprise, and not wanting to destroy the dramatic picture by abandoning our pose. But at last we knew that the clansmen had all filed on to the platform, to stand behind us in formidable array.

Then, furtively at first, and finally with a mad rush, the Epsin and I'din clogged the exits, until at last Liltrin, I and the Ta n'Ur were left alone in the hall.

Liltrin threw herself into my arms and so ecstatic was our embrace that Uldor barked a sharp command to the clansmen to about-face, that we—or they—might not be embarrassed. It must have been the latter, because Liltrin and I did not even know they were there for a long time. . . .

"It was a simple enough matter," Uldor explained later,

when we questioned him as to how the Ta n'Ur had gained the castle. "When we found you had been captured, we knew a trap had been set. So we pretended to abandon you and flee.

"We sped back to the border of the desert, and our dogs were so fast we knew no pursuit could have kept up with us. So, instead of returning toward Borlan, we cut deeper into the desert below Gakalu.

Then, following the Great Gakalun Canal, we dashed straight north, and flashed through the city itself to the very walls of the castle before any opposition developed.

"There was commotion inside. The walls were unguarded. We scaled them by shooting a line over a parapet with a spring-gun, and then hauling up a stouter rope. We heard the roar of Danan-lih's guns. The few Gakalunin we met were fleeing in terror. We ran through the corridors toward the sound of the guns. The rest you know."

At this juncture a slave entered and bowed low.

"Master," he said "there is a great crowd without, shouting acclaim to Danan-lih and Ur Liltrin. They have sent emissaries to beg that you will ap-

pear before them."

Lilrin looked at me shrewdly. "You can't show yourself this time in these tatters, Danan-lih," she protested, "or they'll expect you to look that way always. Whatever shall we do?"

"There's undoubtedly a store of clothing here somewhere," I suggested, "but it might take us hours to find."

Then I got an inspiration. "Hey, wait a moment! I've got myself a swell idea. Danan-lih first appeared on this planet among the Ta n'Ur. Right? His bride is a Myara of the Ta n'Ur. It is fitting that the garb of the Ta n'Ur shall be the of-

ficial dress at the court of the new Alar-Lur—and the Alara-Lur—of Mars!"

It was nothing but a flash thought, suggesting itself to me as a quick solution of a bothersome problem. But Lilrin gave me a startled look, as did Uldor.

"The Ta n'Ur—Descendants of Kings," she murmured in a tone of awe. "And so, my Danan-lih, you have fulfilled yet another prophecy. *'For their garb shall be the garb of Kings.'*"

"It is a phrase in the Ancient Tradition, over the interpretation of which our wise men have puzzled for many generations. But come! We have no time to waste! Quick, Uldor, give us

clothing!"

AND so a few moments later, garbed exactly alike in the simple costume of the clansmen, Lilrin and I stepped forth from the great triangular gate in the base of the castle, to be greeted by a mighty roar of acclaim from the united populace of Gakalu and the men of the Ilmon fleet, which now was tied up at the quay.

"Hail to Danan-lih and Lilrin, Alar-Lur and Alara-Lur of the Northern Cities!" roared the crowd. "Alar and Alara of Gakalu! Myar-Lur and Myara-Lur of the Ta n'Ur!"

And then, in front of them all, Lilrin kissed me.

So, much as I would like to return to my native planet, I feel that my duty lies here. No Martian, I am sure, could lead anything but a miserable existence on Earth, where gravity is so much greater, and Lilrin says she wouldn't let me go without her.

Besides, she points out shrewdly, the tradition says nothing at all about the "Second Danan" flying off in the void of space on a foolish trip to the Green Star, and besides the people wouldn't stand for it.

As for that Martian who had betrayed Libria and

me to the overlord of Gakalu—well, one must realize that spies are ever to be found when conditions of war obtain. Perhaps, on the other hand, it had been a clansman of the Ta n'Ur, jealous of my position and determined to bring me down, by means fair or foul, from a pedestal not of my own making. But whoever that informer may be—I shall seek him out!

Some day, I hope during my lifetime, someone will rediscover the secrets that died with old Doctor Brandisch, who built the first successful space ship and then promptly went insane when I flashed off to Mars in it.

Some day I shall find time to study the mechanisms of that ship and transmit the specifications to Earth by radio, so that, perhaps, a delegation from "the old home planet" may visit us here and see what Lilrin and I have accomplished as the rulers of half a world.

I wish I knew what the other half, below the great equatorial desert, is like. In fact, if I can ever convince Lilrin that I am not secretly planning a return to Earth (for, being a woman, she doesn't like the way the first Danan skipped out and left his bride,) I'm going to have the water pumped out of the old space ship and whisk across the desert in it to have a look at that other hemisphere.

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*It's amazing how much you can learn
about absolute strangers if you just
stop to think about the kind of an
animal they'll put in a . . .*

TEST ROCKET!

By JACK DOUGLAS

CAPTAIN BAIRD stood at the window of the laboratory where the thousand parts of the strange rocket lay strewn in careful order. Small groups worked slowly over the dismantled parts. The captain wanted to ask but something stopped him. Behind him Doctor Johansen sat at his desk, his gnarled old hand tight about a whiskey bottle, the bottle the doctor always had in his desk but never brought out except when he was alone, and waited for Captain Baird to ask his question. Captain Baird turned at last.

"They are our markings?" Captain Baird asked. It was not the question. Captain Baird knew the markings of the Rocket Testing Station as well as the doctor did.

"Yes," the doctor said, "they

are our markings. Identical. But not our paint."

Captain Baird turned back to the window. Six months ago it had happened. Ten minutes after launching, the giant test rocket had been only a speck on the observation screen. Captain Baird had turned away in disgust.

"A mouse!" the captain had said, "unfortunate a mouse can't observe, build, report. My men are getting restless, Johansen."

"When we are ready, Captain," the doctor had said.

It was twelve hours before the urgent call from Central Control brought the captain running back to the laboratory. The doctor was there before him. Professor Schultz wasted no time, he pointed to the instrument panel. "A sudden

shift, see for yourself. We'll miss Mars by a million and a quarter at least."

Two hours later the shift in course of the test rocket was apparent to all of them and so was their disappointment.

"According to the instruments the steering shifted a quarter of an inch. No reason shows up," Professor Schultz said.

"Flaw in the metal?" Doctor Johannsen said.

"How far can it go?" Captain Baird asked.

Professor Schultz shrugged. "Until the fuel runs out, which is probably as good as never, or until the landing mechanism is activated by a planet-sized body."

"Course? Did you plot it?" The doctor asked.

"Of course I did," Professor Schultz said, "as close as I can calculate it is headed for Alpha Centauri."

Captain Baird turned away. The doctor watched him.

"Perhaps you will not be quite so hasty with your men's lives in the future, Captain?" the doctor said.

Professor Schultz was spinning disks. "No contact," the professor said, "No contact at all."

That had been six months ago. Three more test rockets had been fired successfully before the urgent report came through from Alaskan Observation Post

No. 4. A rocket was coming across the Pole.

The strange rocket was tracked and escorted by atomic armed fighters all the way to the Rocket Testing Station where it cut its own motors and gently landed. In the center of a division of atomic-armed infantry the captain, the doctor, and everyone else, waited impatiently. There was an air of uneasiness.

"You're sure it's not ours?" Captain Baird asked.

The doctor laughed. "Identical, yes, but three times the size of ours."

"Perhaps one of the Asian ones?"

"No, it's our design, but too large, much too large."

Professor Schultz put their thoughts into words. "Looks like someone copied ours. Someone, somewhere. It's hard to imagine, but true nevertheless."

They waited two weeks. Nothing happened. Then a radiation-shielded team went in to examine the rocket. Two more weeks and the strange rocket was dismantled and spread over the field of the testing station. The rocket was dismantled and the station had begun to talk to itself in whispers and look at the sky.

Captain Baird stood now at the window and looked out at the dismantled rocket. He looked but his mind was not on the parts of the rocket he could see from the window.

"The materials, they're not ours?" the captain asked.

"Unknown here," the doctor said.

The captain nodded. "Those were our instruments?"

"Yes." The doctor still held the whiskey bottle in a tight grip.

"They sent them back," the captain said.

The doctor crashed the bottle hard against the desk top. "Ask it, Captain, for God's sake!"

The captain turned to face the doctor directly. "It was a man, a full grown man."

The doctor sighed as if letting the pent-up steam of his heart escape. "Yes, it is a man. It breathes, it eats, it has all the attributes of a man. But it is not of our planet."

"Its speech . . ." the captain began.

"That isn't speech, Captain," the doctor broke in, breaking in sharply, "It's only sound." The doctor stopped; he examined the label of his bottle of whiskey very carefully. A good brand of whiskey. "He seems quite happy in the storeroom. You know, Captain, what puzzled me at

first? He can't read. He can't read anything, not even the instruments in that ship. In fact he shows no interest in his rocket at all."

The captain sat down now. He sat at the desk and faced the doctor. "At least they had the courage to send a man, not a mouse. Doctor, a man."

The doctor stared at the captain, his hand squeezing and unsqueezing on the whiskey bottle. "A man who can't read his own instruments?" The doctor laughed. "Perhaps you too have failed to see the point? Like that stupid general who sits out there waiting for the men from somewhere to invade?"

"Don't you think it's a possibility?"

The doctor nodded. "A very good possibility, Captain, but they will not be men." The doctor seemed to pause and lean forward. "That rocket, Captain, is a test rocket. A test rocket just like ours!"

Then the doctor picked up his whiskey bottle at last and poured two glasses.

"Perhaps a drink, Captain?"

The captain was watching the sky outside the window.

(cont. from page 99)

formist, whether done for *Playboy* or a literary journal. It is good, skillful work; but like his weird material, it is bracketed by legions of other good, skillful writers.

When a new book of his is reviewed, inevitably the few items of science fiction are singled out and most of the rest given only a

polite nod. The only books of Bradbury's that the future will not "burn" are those that hew closest to the style of *The Martian Chronicles*. His "messages" score only when clothed in the vestments of science. H. G. Wells and Jules Verne both had to learn that lesson. It is now Bradbury's turn.

THE END



No World for the Timid

By CHARLES E. FRITCH

This is a story for readers who like their meat raw, their facts plain and unvarnished, their fiction tough and realistic. If you want the full effect, read it at midnight during a cyclone.

ALL afternoon I've been sitting here at the mouth of the cave looking down into the valley at the empty riverbed and the lumps of rubble that gravemark what was once a city. In my memory the river is full and the city is tall, and people wander through neon streets. But then I blink my eyes and the river is dry and the people are dead and the city is no more. One of the children was down there today playing in the ruins. He brought back the symbol of death, a human skull that somehow had not disintegrated.

It gave me a shock at first,

but I wasn't angry. I got over being angry a long time ago. I thought I'd gotten over shocks, too, but the thought of death startled me. I had never forgotten that there used to be others alive in the world, but there had been no bodies left behind to remind me that life is a fleeting, tenuous thing. And now, suddenly, I was reminded. I thought: how long will it be before I am no longer living, I the last man alive.

I looked at the ivory skull, balancing it in my hand, gazing without compassion into the empty eyesockets, trying

to feature it with a nose, with lips, with hair. I got to thinking of Marla, and the skull became her skull. I had never loved her, really, but now I began to miss her very much. So very, very much that it hurt to think about it. I buried the skull in a pile of ashes near the cave and tried to bury my thoughts along with it.

When I got back to the cave, the children were all there fighting over a scrawny corpse of rabbit. I walked into their midst and snatched the body from them. When the oldest made a move to grab it from me, I struck him; he fell against the wall, whimpering, and looked up at me with cold eyes.

"We'll share this," I said slowly. "First, we'll make a fire and then we'll cook it. Then we share it." I looked at each one in turn. "We'll act like human beings."

They were like animals. They fought over scraps of meat with tooth and nail; they'd just as soon eat the animal raw, alive if need be.

I'd eaten worse things to survive, but now I felt sick thinking about it. Now, we're above ground and things should be different. I've tried to civilize them, God knows, but there's a limit to a mor-

tal's power. Four children, one male and three females, born in the utter blackness of a cavern miles beneath the surface of an Earth ravaged by atomic winds. I should kill them all, all of them, before they get too large for me to handle.

I've thought about that. Why bother starting over? Except for us, the world is dead. Why not leave it that way? End it now, forget it, and let nature try again in a few billion years if she wants to.

I keep thinking about it. I hold the future in my hand, to caress it and make it live, or to crush it and make it die with a simple closing of my hand. Sometimes I wish it weren't so. Sometimes when I'm alone here with only the wind to whisper forgotten melodies and the trees to wave skeleton limbs against the night, and the children are prowling like animals in search of food— But I won't kill them. I should, probably, but I won't.

We five are the last, the culmination of an evolution that took a million years. Where next, I wonder? Will my children or my children's children or *their* children touch another radioactive match to the world and watch

it go up in flames, watch it explode once more like some cosmic firecracker?

That's what happened this time. I saw only the beginning of it, but that was enough. Rockets shrieking across the sky like flaming banshees; great blossoms of smoke and flame that shook whole cities apart at the seams; noises like the gates of Hell rumbling open (and perhaps they were); the air beginning to glow like it was on fire, the ground starting to rumble and shake and crack open in great sores.

I remember it well. I was trying to get away from the cities, not realizing that there was no escape anyplace. Scared? I was terrified. I ran into a cave to get away—and the mouth of the cave closed up like a healed wound. I was trapped . . . but I was safe, too.

It was there I met Maria, and that's why I sometimes think that maybe Fate meant it this way. That's one of the reasons I hesitate to kill the children. I've never believed in Fate before, but—well, you never know.

There, in a system of tunnel - connected caverns, safe from the radioactive winds and the fiery blasts, we

stayed together and tried not to listen to the death rattles of the outside world. Maria was not pretty, but the pale glow of torchlight and the dying world made her the most desirable woman alive. After awhile, our wood supply gave out, and there came the darkness. And then our food supply was gone, and we went forth into the darkness to find more.

Humanity is persevering. We drank from an underground pool whose water seeped from above through layers and layers of rock. There was no way of testing it for radioactivity, but without water we could not survive so we drank it. Food we found crawling through the dark tunnels or hanging like damp moss on the sides of the caves. There were rabbits and squirrels and rats that had escaped into the tunnels, become imprisoned, and these we ate; and there were other things native to caves that we ate, too. You can get used to anything after awhile, if you have to.

"But what will happen when there is nothing more to be eaten?" Maria wondered.

"We'll worry about that when it happens," I told her.

"Would we turn cannibal?" she insisted.

"What do you mean?"

"It's happened," she said quietly. "Would we draw straws to see who would be eaten? Or would it happen sometime when one of us was asleep—"

"Marla, for God's sake, don't talk like that even as a joke! We'll find food, and we'll live, and we'll get back to the surface. But don't joke about something like that!"

"Yes," she said slowly in the darkness, "yes, I was only joking."

I felt relief flood me at that, but later I wondered despite myself if she had been even remotely serious. Darkness and lack of food can do unhealthy things to a person. Besides, the water might easily be contaminated, and anything might result. I knew one thing, though—we had to get out or become animals, or worse than animals.

"We could always eat the children," she said, not too long afterwards, when we were searching for food.

"We could," I admitted, knowing she could not be serious this time, "if we had any."

"We will have," she promised. . . .

It seemed much sooner

than the conventional nine months—but then in the darkness you couldn't gauge the passage of time. How long we were down there I don't know, but it must have been years and years. Somehow we managed to exist. We were both thin to the point of emaciation, but we lived; I think we even adapted to the environment. I wondered what the children would look like.

I wanted children, of course, as did Marla; when we got back to the surface—never once did I doubt that!—a family would get the re-birth of Earth started again. It was a pleasant thought being a new Adam, and I dreamt often of the day I would lead my children into the sunlight.

The day came years later.

One of the children found the opening and the sunlight, a shaft of pure gold falling to the cave floor. My eyes burned at the glare, but the children ran to it, chattering excitedly, and felt of the column of light as though it were something solid. I could feel my heart beating wildly for the first time in many long years; it was as though it had been stopped all this time and only just started again.

"The outside," I breathed.
"Marla, the *outside!*"

I took her hand in mine and led her toward the opening. She trembled and grew stiff as we approached the light.

"No," she screamed suddenly, pulling away, "it'll burn me, it'll burn me! I'll die."

"You'll be all right," I said, squinting impatiently to see, and half-pulled her to the opening.

"No!" she screamed again and fainted.

Puzzled, I carried her back down into the cavern, down to the damp, dark cavern, and slowly, slowly, she came alive again.

"The light," she moaned, "the light."

"We've got to get used to it again," I said, though my own eyes were on fire from it. "We can't go on like this forever, staying underground like animals. We've just got to get used to it again, that's all."

But it terrified me just the same. The thought of going up there, out of the cooling darkness, facing that bright, hot glare that seemed capable of peeling the flesh from me. . . .

I tried not to think of it. I tried to remember the days

before the world took fire and burned. We must go up again and rebuild the world, I told myself; human beings were meant for a destiny greater than rotting underground.

"No," Marla cried, shrinking back. "I'm not going out. I'm staying here where I belong, where we both belong."

I grew angry with her. "We're human beings," I told her. "We belong in the sunlight."

She began to cry. Disgusted, I took her hands and dragged her screaming along the stone corridor toward the shaft of light and into it and out into the light of day. The blinding light came, and with it a great warmth that made my skin burn. She beat against me with frail fists, and I struck her and she fell in the sunlight and lay still.

"Marla," I said, not looking at her. There was no answer.

Eyes closed, I felt the warm glow that flamed against my eyelids. I felt my body tingle with the rays of sun stabbing me with bright shiny needles. Then slowly, slowly, I worked my eyes open again. Colors came—green, black, yellow, brown, green, black, black—sickly mats of grass trying vainly to cover layers and layers of

ashes. Below me, the world fell away into a valley of utter, dismal silence. But the sunlight was beautiful.

At the mouth of the cave, the children looking down at her, Marla lay in the golden sunlight; she was thin, incredibly ugly, with skin as colorless as paste and oozing sores welting her body.

I vomited then, and didn't turn back. It would be a big job, rebuilding the world....

I haven't done very well at it, I'm afraid. The world is in as much ruin as ever, and there's so little time left. The children will have to carry on. No, I won't kill them.

They're getting big now, growing fast, and pretty soon they'll be pushing me around. The male will be the leader, of course. He's oldest, strongest, smartest, and very clever for his age. It's still pretty difficult to find food, but our son will manage all right. He said something today that reminded me of a thing his mother said long ago.

He gnashed his teeth and made tearing motions with his claws and shook his hairy body and rustled his wings.

"Someday I'm going to eat you," he said.

And you know, someday I believe he will. THE END

(cont. from page 22)

at the moment, the hero of the hour only has eyes for Miss Kelly here."

"Begging your pardons, sirs, yes," Larry said happily.

Nodding and smiling, the President of the Galactic Federation and Admiral Stapleton left the dispensary room—with the doctor.

"Well, hero," Sheila said, and smiled.

Larry realized—quite suddenly—that, inside himself,

he was alone. Mayhem had done his job—and vanished utterly.

"You know," Sheila said, "it's as if you—well, I hope this doesn't get you sore at me—as if you grew up overnight."

Before he kissed her Larry said: "Maybe you're right. Maybe I'll tell you about it someday. But you'd never believe me."

THE END

ON SALE IN JANUARY FANTASTIC (Nov. 26th)

A BRAND NEW CONAN NOVELET — SHADOW IN THE SKULL by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & LIN CARTER.



RELUCTANT GENIUS

By O. H. LESLIE

It is said that Life crawled up from the slime of the sea-bottoms and became Man because of inherent greatness bred into him before the dawn of time. But perhaps this urge was not as formless as we think.

BUOS was chastising Laloi as they sped through the ionosphere of the green planet. But like the airy creature she was, Laloi ignored the criticism and rippled sephyr-like through a clump of daffodils when they completed their descent.

"So pretty," she sighed. She flung her incorporeal substance around each flower, absorbing their unified

beauty of scent, sight, and feel. Buos shrilled himself into a column of wind to express his displeasure at her attitude.

"Stupid, silly, shallow thing!" he said. "If the others only knew how you behaved—"

"And you'll be glad to tell them, of course," she said, extending her fingers of air into the roots of the wind-

bent grass. She rolled across the hill ecstatically, and Buos followed in grumbling billows of energy.

"I don't carry tales," he replied, somewhat mortified. "But we're here as observers, and you insist upon making this world a plaything . . ."

"I love it," she said happily. "It's so warm and green."

Buos whipped in front of her angrily. "This is an assignment," he snapped, his emotion crackling the air about him. "We have a purpose here."

"Purpose!" she groaned, settling over a patch of crowded clover. "How many centuries will this assignment last?"

"This world is young," said Buos. "It will take time."

"But how long?" she asked mournfully. "Our world will be shrivelled and dead before these people have the knowledge to rescue us. Why can't we spend our lives here . . ."

"And leave the others behind?" said Buos stiffly. "Selfish being," he said sadly. "This world cannot support one-fourth our number."

"Oh, I know, I know," Laloi said. "I do not mean to say such things. I am twisted

by my sorrow . . ." As if to express her self-abnegation, she corkscrewed out of the clover and into a thin spiral of near-nothingness.

"Settle down, foolish one," said Buos, not unkindly. "I know your feelings. Do you think I am not tormented as well, by the slow pace of these Earth-things? Crude, barbaric beings, like children with the building blocks of science. They have such a long way to go . . ."

"And so few know," said Laloi despairingly. "A handful of seeing minds, tens of millions of ignorant ones. Not even first principles—they're stupid, stupid!"

"But they will learn," Buos said stubbornly. "That is historical fact. Someday, they will know the true meanings of matter and light and energy. Slowly, yes, slowly. But in terms of their growth, it will seem like great speed to them . . ."

"And in terms of our world," said Laloi, spinning sadly over the ground, "they may be far too late . . ."

"No!" In his excitement, Buos forgot himself and entwined with the flowing form of the she-creature, and the result was a rending of the air that cracked like heat

lightning over the field. "No," he repeated again. "They must not be too late. They must learn. They must build from the very ground, and then they must fly. And then their eyes must be lifted to the stars, and desire must extend them to all the universe . . ."

"It seems so hopeless—"

"It cannot be! Our destiny is not extinction. They must come to us, in fleets of silver, and replant our soil, and send towers of green shooting into our sky, breathing out air."

"Yes, yes!" Laloi cried pitifully. "It will be that way, Buos. It will be that way! That man-creature, we will begin with him . . ."

Buos floated earthward disconsolately. "He is a dreamer," he said cheerlessly. "His mind is good; he thinks of tomorrow; he is one of the knowing ones. But he cannot be moved, Laloi. His thoughts may fester and die in the prison of his brain . . ."

"No, they will not! We have watched him. He understands much. He will help us!"

"I have seen his like before," said Buos hopelessly. "He thinks and he works, and his conclusions will die still-born for lack of a moving force . . ."

"Then let us provide it, Buos. Let us move him!"

"With what?" said the other disdainfully. "Arms of nothing? Hands of vacuum? A breeze against his cheek? A rustle of leaves? A meaningless whistle in his ear?"

"Let us try. Let us try! This empty watchfulness is destroying us. Let us move him, Buos. Come!"

Faster than the sky-sweeping clouds they flew, over the gently-swelling hills, over the yearning branches of the trees, over the calm blue waters of the lakes. Swifter than the flight of birds they came, searching for a thinking mind . . .

They found him at last.

"He knows, he knows," said Laloi. "Only now to say 'this is so because' and 'this must happen when'! Only to think—to understand—"

They hovered over his head, in a pandemonium of helplessness. They whirled, and tumbled, and shrilly circled. And then to Laloi the inspiration came.

The apple, caught by a sudden gust of wind, twisted from the tenuous hold of the tree and fell to the ground.

The man, startled, picked it up.

He gazed at it, deep in thought.

THE END



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